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## James Killus Sleeping in Fritz Leiber's Bed

So I have a friend named Jeanne, who tells me she is looking for a new mattress. "I've never had a new mattress before," she says. "I've always made do with, at best, second-hand beds and mattresses. The bed I'm using now used to belong to Fritz Leiber. When we got it, after Fritz died, I had to let it air out for weeks before it was usable; both Fritz and Margo were heavy smokers, and the thing just reeked. . . ."

"Say no more," I tell her. I don't ask how she happened to come by Fritz Leiber's bed. I know that her ex-husband Don had been a friend of Fritz's, and Don had helped manage the memorial service for Fritz that had been held at the San Francisco Neptune Society Columbarium.

I also don't ask about any supernatural occurrences having to do with the bed, though that is what immediately springs to mind. It would have to, wouldn't it? After all, we're talking about the man who wrote "Midnight by the Morphy Watch" and *Our Lady of Darkness*.

Instead, I tell Jeanne my oft-told writer's bed story: A writer friend of mine was selling her bulky stuff after graduation, because she was moving, and who wants to hang on to student furniture? She'd enlisted the aid of a local science fiction fan, who to my friend's bemusement was working the phone, hawking her stuff as Real Professional Writer's Memorabilia.

"Yeah," she overheard him telling one buddy, "We're selling a bed; owned by a writer, she's an SFWA member. . . ." My friend muttered under her breath, "Why don't you tell him I slept with another SFWA member in it?" and the guy continues, without missing a beat: "and she slept with another SFWA member on it."

Pause. He listens.

He looks up and says, "He'll go another fifty dollars if it was Asimov."

Of course, I told the bed story to temporarily misdirect my own attention so my subconscious would quiet down. It was raising a ruckus; I knew I had to do something with the phrase *Sleeping in Fritz Leiber's Bed*. It was a gift, a found object, a shiny pebble shaped like a Zen koan.

The longest time I ever spent in Fritz Leiber's company was an afternoon in which neither of us said a word. It was in attendance to a showing at the Pacific Film Archive of *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*—the two Louise Brooks classics, directed by G. W. Pabst. I was supposed to have met my sculptor friend Dale Enzenbacher there; Dale, in turn, had been told of the showing by Fritz. Fritz collected Dale's work, as did I. It seemed a sufficient excuse to hobnob with a literary idol. But Dale didn't show, so I introduced myself to Fritz, and after the films I drove him and his lady, Margo Skinner, to the bus station for their return to San Francisco. I offered to drive them all the way home, but they refused, possibly because my car was very small, and Fritz was very tall, and Margo was very large.

Fritz commissioned a work from Dale: a figurine of Louise Brooks as Lulu, in *Pandora's Box*. Fritz hoped to present it to Brooks in person. But she died before Dale had completed it, then Fritz died,

## Special Writers on Writing Issue

Jim Killus on Fritz Leiber & Louise Brooks

Damien Broderick's life in SF

Robert Reed on his Marrow stories

Zoran Živković on his Fourth Circle

Jack Dann: What James Dean Means to Me

James Morrow Thinks about Storytelling

Bruce Baugh on SF and Game Design

Plus reviews, a Read This about books on writing, some Scream, & an editorial!

## Damien Broderick The Space of Voluptuous Choice: My Affair with Science Fiction

Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist in the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space. . . .

—Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

I

For four decades, I have been a public reviewer and critic of science fiction, starting recklessly as a teenager in the Monash University newspaper *Chaos* (subsequently, under my coeditorship, *Lee's Wife*), moving on to professional reviewing in the *Melbourne Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *National Times*, the *Age* again for a decade, *24 Hours*, *Australian Book Review*, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Those were conversations with a general readership; I honed my critical skills among my sf friends and peers in samizdat journals such as *SF Commentary*, *Thymos*, *Australian SF News*, *The National*, and the fabled second series of *Australian Science Fiction Review*. More recently, I've been fortunate to publish in such journals as the *British Foundation* and especially *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, the premier magazines of commentary in the field.

I have been engrossed, then, in reading science fiction for the last half century, in writing it professionally for some forty years and, for about as long, tussling critically with its texts, with varying degrees of theoretical sophistication and technical insight. My new book, *x, y, z, Dimensions of Science Fiction* (from Borgo Press, 2004) is a consolidation (and frequently a reappraisal, in a frank variety of voices) of those readings. In two previous books, *Reading by Starlight* (1997)

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## The New York Review of Science Fiction

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# The Space of Voluptuous Choice

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and *Transrealist Fiction* (1999), I followed the path of the academy, examining the way "modern" (but not modernist) science fiction transformed into the thousand flowers of postmodern sf, and also into a method, transealism, for enriching its own distinctive possibilities. In the latest book I try to avoid any considerable overlap, putting to one side writers and texts read closely in those earlier volumes—Aldiss, Dick, Egan, Rucker, Jameson, Suvín, Todorov, a dozen more—although I begin my journey with a return to the jolting encounter with one tutelary theorist of those earlier studies, Samuel R. Delany.

## II.

Science fiction—speculative fiction, syncretic fantasy—is the extreme narrative of difference, of *variation*.

That, at any rate, is its ambition. In commercial truth, it is largely a consumer literature—a telling—of audacious invention followed by ingenious variation followed by safe repetition, unto the fourth generation. At its best, the telling it tells is a tolling: the repetitive clang that alerts us, fires our nerves, steadies our gaze, with the message that something new and different has sprung upon us. At its worst, it is a machine for churning novelty into the comforting consolations of the familiar and impossibly gratifying.

Its best imaginative stories are told in full unblinking awareness of the true open dimensionality of space and time, by contrast with the provisional and largely contingent character of our own locality, our parochial epoch. At least those appear to be its possibilities. If the reality often falls short, it is hardly surprising. When our canvas is the entire cosmos across all of history past and future, stretched infinitely outward along the  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  dimensions of space, and up and down the long  $t$  of time, nobody should be distressed when poor human artists fail to do the text justice. Sometimes, though, the attempts are (to choose a word at once paradoxical and appropriate) *magical*. Science fiction, told right, can make your head and heart ring like bells.

This is the narrative form that insists above all: new spaces and times, new ways of being, await us. These are the exotic places and states humans might enter, even if we begin by paving the earth over and remaking ourselves into posthumans.

Consider this raw poetry of the scientific imagination, penned by the late Carl Sagan decades ago for his book *The Cosmic Connection* (1975):

There is a place with four suns in the sky—red, white, blue, and yellow; two of them are so close together that they touch, and star-stuff flows betwix them.

I know of a world with a million moons.

I know of a sun the size of the Earth—and made of diamond.

There are atomic nuclei a mile across that rotate thirty times a second. . . .

There are stars leaving the Milky Way. There are immense gas clouds falling into the Milky Way. . . .

There are, perhaps, places outside our universe. (51)

That is not fiction, but simple reality—a kind of reality we have known only for a century, indeed perhaps only for half a century. Tomorrow's deathless humans will go there, into that extreme void, to gaze upon the diamond stars and the million moons. Here and now, long before that wonderful era opens, we can go with them in imagination.

And what we find there might not be all gushing astonishment and awe. Reality bites, even in science fiction—especially, perhaps, in sf. There is an undercode to the human soul that finds its shadow in strange places. It will walk with us as we step from the airlock of the spaceship, through the portal of the time machine, exploring all the dimensions of spacetime's relativistic chart: the  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  of space, the  $t$  of time.

Readers who love traditional or mainstream or literary fiction, with its warm, desperate, always complicated characters, sometimes regard science fiction tales with suspicion. Can we actually relate to these odd, oddly imagined people and their futuristic worlds, their impossible powers over space and time, their silver jumpuits and alien predators? Luckily, that's an erroneous and outdated impression. Like

all compelling fiction, the best sf is about people. Unless you can be seized imaginatively by the characters (even if they are robots or intelligent heartbroken squids), unless you can share a measure of empathy or loathing for them, no story can be successful. Human nature, however twisted by difference and technology it might become, can be the vital touchstone in an alien world.

Science fiction is the mystique of the outlandish, the dizzying, the variant, the large unknown region of search space. And that is everywhere around us in a time like this, an era of unprecedented change. No wonder science fiction is enjoying such a surge of popularity even as its best work is often lost to memory.

Disorientation is itself part of the thrill, the addictive zing. Discomfort, exhaustion, sheer *foreignness* are a large part of what makes us tingle with anticipation at the prospect of heading out into the unknown, into the exotic, where we find ourselves energized, imagination and joy rekindled. And the stifling heat and freezing chills, the unappealing smells, the dismal waiting, the loneliness and anxiety of strange places without anything familiar to grab on to for solace. . . . Like the best art, it is exactly what makes life piercingly poetic, if we're to believe that wise old Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovsky: "Art exists to make us recover the sensations of life; it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone *stony*." Nothing makes a stone more stony than having one stick in your shoe in the middle of nowhere.

In the last few decades, alas, huge industries have emerged to smooth the stones, in reality and fiction alike. The world stands in risk of being homogenized, blanded into an episode of *Big Brother* or *Survivor*. Luckily, imagination isn't so easily trapped. Even if the whole earth sometimes seems doomed to a future of global uniformity, other places—Carl Sagan's astonishing planets and stars among them—lie in wait to bite. Some of them hang over our heads, in the depths of space where we and our machines have just begun to step. Think of Sojourner, crawling years ago in the red dust of Mars, as we watched at home on TV over its solar-cell shoulder. Other places, no less peculiar, quiver in the long-lost past and the far future or peer at us sideways from the shadows of worlds that might have been.

And even this apparently familiar world of ours isn't so easily subdued, for that matter. Away from the secure pathways, strange and slightly twisted localities wait to seize us, to make us tremble or sigh. We know too much today to take anything for granted. Think of the deep desert's profound solitude that increasingly evades us, snug in our cities. Even in our happiest garden moments, we deny ourselves (unless we go searching, travelers in the late wilderness) the sight, say, of a remote Australian desert in flood, an ice mountain calving into the Greenhouse ocean. Today we may venture into such silence, stand under the awesome monoliths of Uluru or enter the cold wastes of Antarctica. If we do go there, though, in reality or in prompted imagination, we voyage differently today, for we know even as we feel, as we gasp. To the city dweller, those deserts are not merely alien and terrifying vacancy—they hold a history measurelessly deeper and more mysterious than any sacred writing has glimpsed. Floods appalling, thousands of years in duration. Landscapes broken into fire by comets smashing down from frigid space. Animals we know today only from their bones and scraps of their DNA.

But science fiction's imagination allows us even greater liberties: travel to all the worlds of the solar system and far beyond, all times from the Big Bang to the exhaustion of unending time, and perhaps outside time itself. SF uses a blend of romantic palette and gritty science, of whimsy and satire, of unchecked *possibility*. Such stories unfold themselves as they build their skewed worlds, and each carries its special frisson: of startlement, or laughter, or rueful irony, or hard political realism.

## III

Not everyone acknowledges this exhilarating perspective. Hard at work on her award-winning novel *Reaching The River* (1990), the distinguished Australian novelist Thea Astley was afflicted most painfully: "I was terrified," she told a journalist, "that it would turn into sci-fi." In the event she was spared this gruesome fate, though it was about as likely as a landscape artist finding her paintbrush pouring forth a sestina or a tensor equation. Late science fiction is a narrative form so sophisticated you can't stumble into it by mistake—only into

its *derrière-garde* parody. True, most *sf* or *fantasy* on newstand displays is neither artistic nor scientific. It is commercial white bread, grainless and starch-filled, equivalent to the busty romance or made-for-TV thriller. I doubt Astley, even in the darkest night of the soul, suspected her book might turn into that sort of *product*.

Science fiction, the pure quill and sometimes its smudged counterpart, is our topic: speculative fiction, *sf*, even "sci-fi," a term generally abominated by science fiction devotees even as it has become the default consumer term for everything gaudy and preposterous, from *Star Wars* mega-movies to the unstoppable franchise lines. Back in 1978, Isaac Asimov—the very embodiment of the mode—observed: "We can define 'sci-fi' as trashy material sometimes confused, by ignorant people, with *s.f.* Thus, *Star Trek* is *s.f.* while *Godzilla Meets Muthra* is sci-fi" (28). More austere than Asimov, I would include *Star Trek* as well under the latter rubric, which doesn't mean that I don't enjoy it sometimes. Enthusiasts steeped in (traditional *sf* have now adopted "sci-fi" (sometimes pronouncing it "skiffi")) in self-defense—as shorthand for *pseudo-sf* kludged together by, and for, the placid grazers: exactly the sort of *product* that artists such as Astley deplore. Is the prevalence of *sf*-ci necessarily a bad thing? Decades ago, the brilliant *sf* innovator Alfred Bester remarked with terrifying kindliness: "As for second-rate, commercial writing—ass-flicking writing, as it were—what's the harm in that? Good god, people who read books in subways don't want to be startled too much, they like nice convenient stories. . . . Good for them, good for all of them, that's great" (in Platt, 244).

Rather inconsistently, as often as I praise its *s*, *f*, and *i* possibilities, I intend also to sink my boot into the genre. As the years unfold along my personal *s* dimension—as the *decades* lumber past—I find myself increasingly in the role of a disillusioned priest or witch doctor, now turning his inside knowledge to use as a participatory anthropologist, trying to defend some barbarous piece of idiosyncrasy while knowing with a sinking heart that the faith is altogether lost. This assessment is incomplete, luckily, though you can catch yourself thinking that way on gloomy days. *SF* is not just a childhood virus that kids catch and throw off after a brief temperature. Nor is it the logomachy of the academic seminar conducted by other means. It is an entire spectrum of narrative choices, an imaginative palette ranging from *X-Men* and Douglas Adams to Philip K. Dick and Olaf Stapledon, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, and John Crowley. Any stark skeptical dichotomy catches the ultraviolet and infrared but loses the rainbow.

In any case, the very best *sf* does not repudiate extremes; it appeals to something eager and open within the crustiest adult heart even as it dazzles the mind with the riches of abstract knowledge and the hard, constrained ambitions of scientific practice.

And that is true even when it falsifies our current view of the universe, because science itself insists that we now know very little and will know a great deal more by and by.

John Clute has written, with resigned contempt, of genre *sf*'s "mild ignorant readership." The genre remained a problem for many sophisticated adult readers. *SF* continues to be ignored or disliked by readers trained to enjoy literary or "canonical" texts while detesting anything else. I am inclined to view this disdain as a sort of learned incompetence, a bigotry that wounds its practitioners as much as its victims. More than one literary Australian journalist has asked me, in genuine puzzlement, "Why do you like science fiction when everyone else hates it?" This strange claim flies in the face of solid sales of *sf* and fantasy in a time when literary fiction struggles to survive. Worse, it ignores the striking realities of popular culture. Of the top-earning movies of all time, the majority are science fiction or fantasy. True, this is largely "product" tailored for unreflecting and sentimental teen consumers and, as we shall see, *real sf* is now in peril. But it can hardly be said that everyone hates *sf* when there's scarcely anything that the audience loves more.

## IV

How did all this come to pass, this rise and rise of what James Gunn has dubbed the "characteristic fiction of our times," even as authorized cultural taste-makers regarded it with contempt? What did it look like to spectators and participants observing the ambiguous four-dimensional graph that maps science fiction and fantasy, those

twinned paraliteratures?

Writing and reading are solitary acts, yet they are social to the core, embedded in plural histories, situated in the flesh and bone of individual humans born in tribes yet severed from one another by consciousness, partitioned inwardly, at war with self and others, hungry for companionship, jealous of the private space and time spent communing within the phantasmatic spacetimes of imagination, eager to share what reading and writing have created and found there. In that awareness, this book is not intended as a distanced, formal treatise. When we are lucky, we speak of the books we adore and revile, one to another over a meal and drink (or as if so), when we find others who share our tastes closely enough for that conversation to be better than idle.

Leslie Fiedler, that great twentieth-century literary scholar, exemplary reader of love and death in American letters, spoke more than once with burning clarity about what it is that works, and what doesn't, in critically reading these paraliteratures. More than twenty years ago, his commentary fell short in advance the tedious excesses (I write as an insider, a fellow of an English department) of certain academic appropriations and disavowals:

[I]t is my conviction as a literary populist, impatient with the alienation of current critical writing from the large audience and all the fiction they especially relish, that I find the attempt to transfer to *sf* approaches which fail to do justice even to Mark Twain, Dickens, or, for that matter, Shakespeare, especially devious, duplicitous, unwittingly hypocritical, or worse, unconsciously self-parodic.

Typically written by a younger generation of university "scholars," who grew up loving hard-core science fiction, but concealed that fact until it no longer seemed an impediment to academic promotion, such articles try to justify a passion rooted in the naive responses of childhood and early adolescence in a language appropriate only to the most sterile hermetic discourse about equally hermetic books. (8)

Without such candor, what forgiveness?

*SF*'s delight in their imagination blends magical escapism with an all-too-realistic awareness of the impact on our world of incessant technological upheaval. Mass media versions of *sf* inevitably debase any subtle play with either component, so it is not surprising that huge success at the box-office fails to translate into fame, fortune, or even critical esteem for *sf*'s best artists. After all, periods when the whole family routinely settled down to watch the latest western did not produce a surge of nuanced novels about existential cowboys. With *sf*, it is more complicated. Despite spectacular capchimes of shaped light, no Spielberg movie or TV series about UFOs or dinosaurs can approach the cognitive delights of print *sf*, from A. E. van Vogt's baffling super-intelligent protagonists to William Gibson's cyberspace and today's venturing into technocapscie.

## V

More than forty years back, I smuggled *sf* magazines with their lurid covers under my childhood mattress and later in my junior seminary cell, the better to preserve their delights from the salvatory clutches of parents and priestly supervisors who knew it rotted your brain. Of course it *did* rot your brain. Here I am all these decades later, still snorting the stuff up my nostrils, although with a seasoned connoisseur's diffidence. Apparently, habituation set in long ago, and by some process that gives hope for our recuperative powers generally, I have developed a considerable measure of resistance. The stuff that set my brains and emotions on the boil when I was a child and adolescent (A. E. van Vogt, Wilmar Shiras, Zenna Henderson) makes me seethe instead today with impatience and dependency. And yet—

Something indelible was marked on my soul: a coiled galaxy viewed from the dark remoteness of eternity, a dinky silver spaceship smoothed and gleaming under the light of an alien sun, a batch of comic strip cartoons where misunderstood supermen strove to subdue an ungrateful world, or at least to preserve inviolate all those secondhand copies of *Science Fantasy* and *Galaxy* hidden under their mattresses.

Finally at 17 I reached university, sat at the feet of philosophers and literary scholars, and learned the error of my ways. Still, although

my improving taste severed me from the pure infantile joy of primitive science fiction, there remained a sense of large possibility in sf's tropes. They were undeniably metaphors peculiarly relevant to an age of unprecedented change. Indeed, their central iconography summoned unfashionable sentiments—hope and awe, a certain access to what I had learned to recognize as the technological sublime—and at the same time a roguish anarchist spirit not quite like anything in even the hard-boiled school of popular writing.

So there is quite often something joyfully exuberant and romantic in sf, fatally kitschy to the cultivated. Like those heightened screen epics that star Charlton Heston or Kirk Douglas—Anthony Mann's *El Cid*, say, or Kubrick's *Spartacus*—sf may play with the consequences of huge

change through the rhetoric of melodrama. But so does Wagner, and I do not find our cultural arbiters complaining about arrested adolescence as they pay through the nose for their opera tickets.

As I have argued previously in *NITRSF*, 1953 was arguably the greatest year in history. What I find quite incredible to contemplate is how near I was, in those lost days of childhood and adolescence, to the very font of it all. It is like having been present at the birth of hieroglyphics or agriculture. ▶

*Damien Broderick splits his time between San Antonio, Texas, and Melbourne, Australia. This piece is drawn from his forthcoming book x, y, z, t: Dimensions of Science Fiction.*

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Zoran Živković

### A Brief History of The Fourth Circle

(The following was written as an afterword to the first American edition of *The Fourth Circle* [Portland, Oregon: Night Shade Books/Ministry of Whimsy Press, 2004].)

I was 45 when I wrote *The Fourth Circle*, in 1993. By that time, I was the author of several books about science fiction, all of them nonfiction. My previous excursions into the realm of fiction were a play, "Project Lyre," and a short story—nothing worth mentioning, although "Project Lyre" was published in a Japanese magazine.

Why would a scholar, with an M.A. and a Ph.D. in science fiction, suddenly decide in middle age to turn to fiction writing?

In 1990, after a decade of truly hard labor, I published *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a two-volume set so large and heavy it could almost have been used as a blunt instrument. It was then I realized a simple fact: there were no more challenges for me. Indeed, what goal more ambitious could I have set for myself, as a writer of nonfiction, than an encyclopedia?

Yet I was intellectually far too young for retirement. The solution to the problem was to find a new challenge elsewhere. One possibility was to embark on an academic career. I could have accepted an offer to teach a course on the history and theory of the sf genre for the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Belgrade. I declined the position, deciding that it wouldn't be very different from early retirement.

What led me to try fiction writing was my editorial experience. In 1982 I founded *Polaris*, one of the first privately owned publishing houses in the former communist countries. *Polaris* was basically a one-man show. I performed every job, from selecting titles to packaging copies to be sent to subscribers. I didn't mind this diversity, until one of the duties finally became a burden too heavy for my increasingly older shoulders.

Editing translations and original texts was a job I never much liked. It's very time-consuming and largely unrewarding. Maybe I wouldn't have found it so difficult if the works hadn't been of poorer and poorer literary quality. It was inevitable that I would eventually ask myself, Why was I wasting my two most precious commodities—time and a certain talent—to promote other writers, when I could invest them in my own writing? I could surely write better than the majority of authors I published in *Polaris*. I admit my stance is arrogant, but without it I probably would never have dared to launch myself into the turbulent sea of fiction writing.

Although rather voluminous, *The Fourth Circle* was written in less than four months in early 1993, a civil war in full swing around me. It was a very peculiar experience, quite different from the writing of any of my non-fiction books, when I knew precisely what I wanted to do and how to do it. In the case of my first novel, there was no plan, no

preconception whatsoever. Although it might sound incredible, when I typed the simplest possible first sentence, "The Circle," I hadn't the slightest idea of what would follow.

But somewhere beneath my conscious level, quite unknown to my rational self, a critical mass was gathering. My knowledge of literature in general and science fiction in particular, accumulated over previous decades, gradually transformed into a new quality. As soon as I had a chance to be released, it erupted almost like a volcano. Actually, the eruption would probably have been even stronger, had it not faced an unexpected technical obstacle: the velocity of my typing. I type (mis)using only my right hand index finger, which, after many years of such abuse, has become rather thicker and more gnarled than its left-hand counterpart.

At that time I went through almost a personality split. I was simultaneously a writer, mostly unconscious of what he was doing, and a reader more and more impatient due to the slowness of the writer's typing. It became particularly frustrating during the closing chapters of *The Fourth Circle*, the Sherlock Holmes pastiche, when I could hardly wait to see whether and how several seemingly unrelated structural threads would eventually merge to form a consistent tapestry.

In the end, the reader was rather satisfied, although somewhat reluctant and embarrassed to state it openly, due to his very close ties with the writer. The writer, for his part, was also pleased, although he remained as blissfully ignorant of what was happening as he had been in the beginning. Yet, he learned maybe the most important lesson about the holy mystery of artistic creativity: one doesn't have to know exactly how something functions as long as it functions.

*The Fourth Circle* was originally published in late December 1993. The following spring it won a prestigious Serbian literary award—the Miloš Crnjanski. Curiously enough, it was a mainstream, not a genre, award. The unquestionable sf elements in my novel were neglected, purposefully or not. It was primarily credited for its "literary values." One eminent critic hailed it as "a postmodern rhapsody."

I should have been more than satisfied. My first foray into literature had already proven quite a success. Alas, the limitations of that success were all too evident. As one cynic rightfully remarked, when you write in Serbian, you don't write at all. Indeed, your work is available to a theoretical maximum of about ten million native speakers, although the real number of potential readers is far, far smaller. The initial print run of *The Fourth Circle* was only 500 copies, with an additional 500 printed after it won the Miloš Crnjanski. And that was it.

If I didn't want to remain first in the village, but to try my luck in the city, I had to provide an English translation of my novel. Once in English, it would become readable not only in the English-speaking

countries, but also throughout the world. To make it happen, however, was by no means straightforward and inexpensive. I confess I have always envied authors who write originally in English. First, they don't have to bother at all about providing translations of their works. Second, they never pay their translators. Their publishers gladly do that for them. But, as we all know, the world isn't a just place, particularly if you aren't among its privileged inhabitants.

Quality English translators from the Serbian are a rare breed. It's no wonder, therefore, that they are in strong demand and appropriately expensive. So even when you manage to engage one, you are not quite certain whether you should be glad because your work will be properly translated, or sad because it is going to cost you a fortune. Sadness usually prevails, since it is an investment that very rarely if ever pays off. What you eventually get for your money is a mere chance to get to where any English-speaking author is when he has just completed his work. There are no guarantees whatsoever even of recouping your investment, let alone of making a profit. You really have to be quite a gambler to agree to such terms.

I certainly felt like one when Mary Popović agreed to translate *The Fourth Circle*. And like any over-optimistic gambler I tried to see only the bright side of the dice throw. First of all, if there was someone able to cope with the translating challenges of my novel, it was Popović. These were rather numerous and demanding. To start with, the four separate narrative lines needed to be distinctive in tone, which was probably the hardest task to achieve. In order to accentuate the differences between them, in the Serbian original I used four different fonts, one of them created particularly for that purpose. It referred to the episode taking place in a medieval monastery, for which I almost invented a new language. Then, there were many intertextual references, ambiguous allusions, puns. . . . It wasn't going to be easy money for the translator.

Indeed, the translating lasted almost six months. I spent a substantial part of that time with Popović, assisting her in finding her way through the complex labyrinths of *The Fourth Circle*. I remember some moments of real trouble, almost desperation, when we struggled to find proper English equivalents for some of the subtler points in the original. I knew from my own experience (more than 50 translated books, mostly from English) that a translator's life is by no means a bed of roses. Yet, only now, working on my own novel, did I fully realize what a martyrdom it could be. Had I not written it myself, I would have been tempted to find the author and explain to him, mostly in a non-verbal way, what I thought of his linguistic and other virtues. By the end, Popović and I were in full agreement: she had been shortchanged for her labor.

In my naïveté, it seemed to me then that the worst part was behind me. I had a—hopefully—good novel, very professionally translated into English. What else could be needed in order to place it with an American or British publisher? Well, first I discovered I needed an agent. That came as a total surprise, since the institution of literary agents simply didn't exist in my part of the world. A writer dealt directly with publishing houses, without any intermediaries. Some American publishers, to whom I sent *The Fourth Circle* in late 1994, returned it unopened, briefly stating that they would only consider manuscripts received through agents.

Eventually, I managed to find an agent to represent me, although right from the start he wasn't very enthusiastic, and understandably so. At that time, with Sarajevo under siege and horrible bloodshed throughout the Balkans, anything with the prefix "Serbian" was automatically and indiscriminately identified as suspicious. Indeed, soon one rejection slip followed another. The fact that none of them had anything to do with the literary qualities of my submission was scant consolation.

Under these bitter circumstances there were also a few amusing incidents. One publisher, for example, happened to like my novel quite a bit. Alas, he concluded that, however good it was, at least at the moment, "unmarketable." (That was the very first time in my life I met this term used in a literary context.) Yet, I got a counteroffer from him. Could I deliver, he asked, a 100,000-word novel about the civil war in Bosnia, preferably in three months? I shouldn't restrain my vivid imagination in any way when it came to atrocities, serial rape, concentration camps, and other similar pleasantnesses so much

admired by the mass audience. Such a novel would be not only marketable, but very probably bound to hit the bestseller lists. The gentleman was rather confused and disappointed to hear that I simply wasn't interested in hiring myself out as a writer, regardless of the advance he might have been willing to offer me.

When apparently there were no more publishers to whom my agent could submit *The Fourth Circle*, he stepped forward with an ingenious proposal. I should change my name. What do you mean, I asked incredulously. He meant I should choose a pen name, preferably something that would sound American. Like what? Well, we could try to find an analogous version of your original name. What would that be? After a brief etymological consideration, he boldly suggested: Donald Livingston. Why would I be Donald Livingston instead of Zoran Živković? Can you really imagine, he asked, that anyone called Zoran Živković would ever be able to publish anything in the United States? I could. He couldn't. So, inevitably, we went our separate ways.

I first received notice that, against all the odds, one of Zoran Živković's works of fiction (not *The Fourth Circle*) had been accepted for publication in the United States in the Spring 1999, during the NATO campaign against my country. It happened between two air raids, in the short period when the electricity was on long enough to pick up my emails. My first thought was that it was another example of the irony of fate. After many years of futile attempts I had finally achieved my goal only to become another regrettable collateral victim in the next bombing. Fortunately, fate wasn't that ironic, although I managed to escape it only by a narrow margin. I happened to live just across the street from the Chinese Embassy which was bombed, allegedly by mistake.

In 2004, exactly a decade after it had become available in English translation, *The Fourth Circle* will at last be brought out in the United States by Night Shade Books/Ministry of Whimsy. And not only this novel, but all my fiction: *Impossible Stories* (an omnibus of five related mosaic-novels: *Time Gifts*, *Impossible Encounters*, *Seven Touches of Music*, *The Library*, and *Steps through the Mist*; also *Night Shade Books/Ministry of Whimsy*) and *The Book/The Writer* (Prime Books). With some luck, I might even see my latest, just-completed novel, *Candid Camera*, published in the same season.

So, as you have seen, esteemed reader, *The Fourth Circle* had a very long journey to make before finally reaching you. But, please, pay no attention to all the troubles it has seen. They are irrelevant. In the solemn world of literature, troubles don't count. The only thing that matters there is what an author has achieved against them. ►

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## The New York Review of Science Fiction Readings

at the South Street Seaport Museum's Melville Gallery  
213 Water Street (near Beekman)

May 10, 2004

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## Sleeping in Fritz Leiber's Bed

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then Dale was mugged when he was living in West Oakland. One of the things taken from him was his sample case, which included the Louise Brooks figurine. I imagine that somewhere in Oakland there is a pawnbroker or a drug dealer with a figurine of Louise Brooks. I wonder if he knows it's her?

Fritz Leiber was one of the premier fantasists of the twentieth century. I personally would say that his only real peer would be Borges. Others might add H. P. Lovecraft, with whom Leiber corresponded in the last few months of Lovecraft's life, or William Burroughs, or any of those from the more recent wave of what gets called magical realism (though the jury seldom returns that early, does it?). If we play the game of "Whose Baby Overboard?" I would willingly sacrifice my entire literary output for either *Conjure Wife* or *Our Lady of Darkness*, and I'd toss in a bunch of my fellow writers as well. They might have other opinions, but hah! I'm the one writing this, and I am a god in this limited space.

Leiber coined the phrase "sword and sorcery," in part to refer to his stories concerning Fafhrd and The Gray Mouser, which grew out of a role-playing correspondence between Leiber (Fafhrd) and Harry Fischer (Gray Mouser). They were influenced perhaps by Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, but were far removed from that barbarian. Leiber's S&S rang with wit and very allusion.

Three (very) different movies have been made from Leiber's *Conjure Wife*. The first was a B picture called *Weird Woman*, in 1944, starring Lon Chaney Jr. The second, and certainly the best, was a British film called *Night of the Eagle* (scripted by Charles Beaumont and Richard Matheson), released in the U.S. as *Burn, Witch, Burn!* In 1980, a spoof was made from it, titled *Witcher Brew*, starring Richard Benjamin and Teri Garr.

The basic story of *Conjure Wife* is that women are witches, real witches, a fact that they hide from their men. They work spells for the betterment of their mates, and a man whose wife is a powerful witch prospers. The protagonist, a small-college professor of anthropology, discovers his wife's activities, and, child of reason that he is, makes her stop her conjurations. This leaves him vulnerable to the black magic of his faculty adversaries' wives, and considerable creepiness ensues. Leiber later updated the story from the small-mindedness of a small college to the world of McCarthy-era advertising in a novella entitled "The Hatchery of Dreams." At the end of his life he was again telling the same plot of ground with a longer work, never finished, and (according to his son Justin) transparently autobiographical. The use of fiction and other artistry to exorcise personal demons was a recurring theme of Leiber's life and his fiction itself. It produced much of his most compelling work.

Of special note are a triptych of stories: "The Winter Flies" (also called "The Inner Circles"), "The Secret Songs," and "237 Talking Statues, Etc." All three were published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the 1960s. In one sense, these are fantasy stories; in another sense, they are not fantasies at all. They are stories about fantasy, in the same way that "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" isn't a fantasy, but a story about a man who has fantasies.

The concrete events in each of Leiber's three stories are mundane. In "The Winter Flies," a man and his wife spend a quiet evening at home with their young son. In "The Secret Songs," a man and his wife prepare for bed, him drinking and taking sedatives, her popping amphetamines while she does the dishes and watching television with the sound off. In "237 Talking Statues, Etc." an alcoholic spends an afternoon hallucinating his father's voice from a large number of self-portraits in different media made by the father.

The characters' fantasies during these stories are where the interesting goings-on occur. In "237 Talking Statues, Etc." the man's hallucinations allow him to have the frank conversation with his father that he could never have had during life; perhaps the two of them come to terms, perhaps not, but at least the words have been said. In "The Secret Songs," the author presents his case in part through an hallucinatory monologue from a "flashing eyed priest" seen by the

wife on the muted television.

THE GORGEOUS PRIEST: The psychology of Donnie and Gwen must be clear to you by now. Each wants the other to sleep so that he may stand guard over her, or she over him, while yet adventuring alone. They have found a formula for this. But what of the future? What of their souls? Drugs are no permanent solution, I can assure them. What if the bars of the safe freedom should blow away? What if one night one of them should go out and never come in?

The husband has his own occult source of knowledge, an emissary from an ancient spacefaring race who looks like a bipedal crocodile:

THE WISE OLD CROCK: Goodbye, my son, for another night. Use your Earthly tenements well. Do not abuse your powers. And go easy on the barbiturates.

DONNIE: I will father, believe me.

THE WISE OLD CROCK: Hold. There is one further secret of great consequence that I must impart to you tonight. It concerns your wife.

DONNIE: Yes, father?

THE WISE OLD CROCK: She is one of us!

One underlying theme of these stories is that the characters are defined by their imagining as much as (or often more than) they are defined by the occurrences in their lives. In "The Inner Circles/The Winter Flies," the husband, Helmut Gottfried Adler, reads Plutarch while getting progressively drunker on the evening's martini, his wife works on an art project, and their son imagines himself in a spaceship beyond the asteroids. When the son becomes lost in space (so lost he winds up in the Cat's Graveyard, a realm of blackness and the fear of death), Adler talks him home:

Then the words came to Gott and when he spoke his voice flowed. "Are your atomic generators turning over, Heinie? Is your space warp level free?"

"Yes, Papa, but the line's gone."

"Forget it. I've got a fix on you through subspace and I'll coach you home. Swing her two units to the right and three up. Fire when I give the signal. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Roger. Three, two, one, fire and away! Dodge that comet! Never mind the big dust cloud. Home on the third beacon. Now! Now! Now!"

The boy has, of course, been right across the room all along, but when Adler lurches over to him and pulls him from his chair into a fatherly embrace, the reader is left with the feeling that if the father *hadn't* entered willingly into the child's fantasy, if he had just demanded that the boy stop his foolishness and go to bed, then in some real sense the son would have been lost forever.

Louise Brooks was a major star of the silent film era, who later became almost entirely forgotten, as if some magician had decided to exchange her memory from mankind. In the 1950s, the French critic Ado Kyrou wrote:

It is doubtful whether any film star . . . is more completely forgotten in the United States than Louise Brooks. When she is remembered at all, it is usually only to confuse her with Colleen Moore or with *The Cat and the Canary* [a silent horror classic, possibly confused with Brooks because of her role in *The Canary Murder Case*—JK]. Her disappearance from the public mind is particularly paradoxical when one realizes that Louise Brooks appeared in twenty-one American films, in nine of which she played the leading role. Of her three European pictures, only *Pendemonium* was shown in the United States and that was brutally mutilated and narrowly restricted in its circulation—a silent film unseen in the period of new excitement over talkies.

Brooks, along with Colleen Moore, exemplified the "flapper" of the Roaring '20s. At age 15, in 1922, she joined the Denishawn Dance

Company, whose members included Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and other pioneers of modern dance. By the age of 17, she lived at the Algonquin Hotel, met George Gershwin, and was the first person to die the Charleston in London's Café de Paris. At 18 she joined the Ziegfeld Follies, had a three-month-long affair with Charlie Chaplin, and signed a five-year contract with Paramount Pictures. The next year she married director Eddie Sutherland (the marriage did not last very long, given the couple's mutual infidelities), appeared in numerous films, and became the inspiration for the comic strip "Dixie Dugan." In 1928, she appeared in Howard Hawks's *A Girl in Every Port*, which came to the attention of the German director G.W. Pabst. Pabst made the decision, controversial in Germany, to cast Brooks in *Pandora's Box*. After that film, she returned briefly to New York, but then returned to Germany for Pabst's film *Diary of a Lost Girl*. Louise Brooks had a seemingly limitless potential.

I attended Fritz's memorial service. It brought to mind a few brushes I had with Mensa in Tennessee in the 1960s, a grouping populated with accountants and second-rate academics, hungry for some general acknowledgment of how special their minds were. Or maybe the Hobbit auxiliary of the California Mythopoeic Society, or would-be hippies living-in-the-Haight-Thirty-Years-Too-Late. There were men who gave their occupations as "Poet," and women who had changed their names to things like "Etherwind."

Or something like that. Maybe I misremember. Memory is treacherous, after all.

But as I ruminate, I think that the significant commonality among those diverse misfits of Fritz Leiber's last years was that of being paralyzed by possibilities and their own imagined potential. Everyone has felt that feeling at one time or another. If you choose Door Number One, then you can't have Door Number Two. If you commit to one person, you can't commit to another. If you have the ice cream, you'd better lay off the beer.

But some people fall into defining themselves by their potential, not their achievements. For young people, this is acceptable, even necessary. As one ages, though, unexercised potential leads by stealth to Impostor Syndrome, or at least to the bumper sticker claiming that the driver would Rather Be Skidding.

Doubtless you've known someone cursed with a Great Potential, who wanted it all, and then wound up with little or nothing to show for it. There are those who wanted to major in six things at once, those who could not choose between music or painting, so they never became good at either. Then there are the many fat and bloated books where the author didn't know how to end the story, because if it ended, then it would be over.

But I don't think Fritz Leiber saw people that way. I think he saw people through their own imaginations, and if they could imagine themselves as grand as their aspirations, well, then Fritz could too.

So they clung to him, and in return he populated his literary world with fantastic characters, each of whom had a spark of genuine life.

He was a better man than I am, I'll warrant. Better even than I aspire to be.

Louise Brooks left Germany after her two films with Pabst. There were many possible reasons for her departure: boredom, personality conflicts, and the estrangement of living surrounded by those speaking a foreign tongue, who considered her an interloper besides. She waffles a bit in her later writings when describing her reasons for leaving. Some of it was no doubt the daunting prospect of the discipline she knew that Pabst would demand of her.

So she came back to the United States, and her still great potential, just as that potential was running out. She was labeled untrustworthy because she refused to do the voiceover work for a silent film of hers they were turning into a talkie. Her drinking definitely had something to do with it, at least to the extent it accentuated her "don't give a damn" attitude. Then there were the rumors that she had betrayed confidences. Kenneth Anger has suggested that Brooks, not Marion Davies, is the source of Orson Welles's use of the word "Rosebud" in *Citizen Kane*. (For those unfamiliar with the legend, Rosebud supposedly refers not to Kane's sled, but to a certain delicate part of his mistress's anatomy).

After her return, Brooks declined slowly into obscurity. First her film career faded; her last film was *Overland Stage Raiders*, released in 1938, starring John Wayne at the beginning of his major film career. She opened a dance studio in Beverly Hills, which failed in 1940. After a disastrous return to her hometown, with the Second World War gathering steam, she fled to New York in 1943 and fell into alcoholic obscurity. She worked for a time as a sales girl. She collected gossip items for Walter Winchell. There are some rumors and possibly apocryphal tales of her dabbling in prostitution during this time. There seems little doubt that she was what was then called a "barfly." One can only wonder if any of the men who took her to bed during this period knew who she was, or who she had been.

Fritz Leiber was still in his teens at the height of Louise Brooks's silent film career. Leiber's father, Fritz Leiber Sr., was a silent film actor of some note, and it is possible that the elder Leiber and Brooks were at least acquainted. I do not know if Fritz the younger knew Brooks. It is unlikely, since Fritz Jr. lived in Chicago when his father had his silent film career in Southern California. But I'd like to think that the younger Leiber met Brooks, perhaps on a visit to the glamour capital. She was only four years his elder, but she was, at that time, vastly more worldly wise.

Leiber the writer did not really appear until the 1940s; his first professional story, "The Jewels in the Forest," a.k.a. "Two Sought Adventure," appeared in 1939, although he had various amateur publications (in a church magazine) prior to that. Leiber has written that he turned to writing in part because it was an area where he would not compete with his father. Leiber Sr. did write and submit some works after learning of his son's ambitions. None of them were published, leaving the way clear for the younger Leiber's all-too-rare victory in what he always perceived as an uneven contest between himself and his father. It's worth noting that Louise Brooks always spoke of her mother as being similarly competitive with her daughter.

Leiber's stories of the 1940s were primarily what may be called "urban horror." Stories like "Automatic Pistol" and "Smoke Ghost" are unquestionably modern in their settings, but the modernity is disturbing, malefic. The antecedents are Lovecraft and Poe, but the culture is sometimes that of science fiction and science fantasy, exploring the dark shadows of the bright new world of the future. Even overt science fiction such as "The Mutant's Brother" carries the dystopian view that people are often just no damn good, and that power corrupts.

Leiber is, in short, and from the very beginning, in love with scaring people. And not simply scaring them with familiar monsters like ghosts and werewolves and vampires. No, he describes clockwork worlds where, if you forget yourself and lose your place, why, they just go on without you, crushing you mercilessly if you get in the way ("You're All Alone," 1950). Or he tells you that success really is a woman, and she will eat your soul ("The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," 1949).

Leiber's stories from this period owe a lot to his own living circumstances, in particular his life in two cities, Los Angeles and Chicago. He began the decade working in a defense plant in Los Angeles (how best to envision a clockwork world or the corrosive effects of the striving for glamour and success?). He ended the decade in Chicago, working as a science writer for *Science Digest*, all the better to learn about the cryogenic separation of gases ("A Pall of Air"), or the equations for General Relativity ("The Nice Girl with Five Husbands," 1951). The seed for his novel *The Wanderer* probably originated in an article he wrote at this time about tides.

Then, in 1954, his publications ceased, not to begin again until 1957. This period is his first alcoholic collapse.

Louise Brooks began the 1950s at a nadir. What skills she possessed (acting, dancing) were not very marketable in a woman well past youth, and her abrasive personality was not well suited for other endeavors. She was, as not to put too fine a point on it, a penniless, drunken has-been.

The lack of income was most serious, of course. She had once lived in luxury hotels; now she had a cheap room and was always behind in the rent. From destitution came desperation.

She contacted William Paley, the president of CBS, who had once

been her lover. The deal they struck was that he would pay her a stipend, and she would attempt to become a writer.

Her first attempt was an autobiography, *Naked, on my Goat*. She burned it after she finished it, saying later that she "could not unbuckle the Bible Belt." By that, she meant that she recognized how important sex had been in her life, but she deemed her attempts to write about it a failure.

But in 1955, there was a Brooks revival in France, and it inspired James Card, the film curator of the Esman House in Rochester, to write to Brooks. He managed to entice her to Rochester to view some of her films, something that she had always refused to do previously.

But instead of confining her interest to her own films, Brooks became a film buff, aided, of course, by personal knowledge of many of the events and personalities of the times she had been center stage. She began to write essays about film.

Her output was, by most standards, meager. There is a single book that contains most of it: *Lulu in Hollywood*. But it is an astonishing work of memoir and history. In a series of essays, Brooks describes personalities and events from her times in the film industry. Some of the individuals are well-known: W. C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, John Wayne. Some of the individuals are obscure, connected to the famous, like "Marion Davies's Niece" whose story is of the high life, homosexuality, and drug use during the silent era.

The overall theme of *Lulu in Hollywood* is that the film industry eats its young. Brooks describes in detail the manner and methods used by the studios to control and exploit the talented. *Lulu in Hollywood* is, among other things, a tale of urban horror.

I have seen criticism of Brooks's essays that faults her reportage and her accuracy of memory and which observes the degree to which hers is a self-serving tale. After all, here is a woman who was on top, who fell, and who now points a finger at those who pushed her from the pedestal.

This misses the point entirely. Brooks's essays are about *Hollywood*, for chrissake! All players in that game engage in an ongoing work of interactive fiction with their own lives and the lives of those around them. Studio heads have been known to have police blotters rewritten, suborn perjury, and otherwise alter facts and history when it suited them. Moreover, as Brooks observes in one of her essays, Hollywood biographers invariably choose the facile anecdote over the truth. *Lulu* played the game by the same rules used by those she wrote about. Ultimately, the important question is, did it make a good story?

And the answer is, well, yes, a very good story. Sometimes it is so good you get gooseflesh. It bears mentioning that her work is about the way that fantasy infests real life.

It may be worth stopping at this point, and answering some obvious questions, like, what the hell is this guy doing here? What's all this connecting Fritz Leiber and Louise Brooks? And what about Leiber's real peers and fellow writers, guys like Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury?

Valid criticisms all. I am shorting other writers in pursuit of a literary conceit. Bloch and Kuttner, especially, are well connected to Leiber. All three corresponded with H. P. Lovecraft. Bloch was mightily influenced by Lovecraft, and certainly was another strong proponent of modern horror. Good lord, the man wrote *Psycho*, though most people probably think that film was created *de novo* by Alfred Hitchcock. Bloch made the Hollywood and pop culture connection at least as strongly as Leiber.

Kuttner, on the other hand, was a writer of many talents, and he included sword and sorcery among them. Kuttner was married to C. L. Moore, and the two of them constituted probably the greatest writing team ever seen in either fantasy or science fiction.

Still, that is part of the point of this essay. Writers have lives; they sleep in real beds. No matter how we try to avoid the issue, people always want to know, how did you come to write this? Where do you get your ideas?

Ultimately, the answer must be either from living or from looking at other art. You base something on something that happened or something you read. Or is that everything? What about the things you imagined? What about the things you imagined as happening?

Suppose they didn't really happen? Would that matter?

When I first started thinking about the phrase "Sleeping in Fritz Leiber's Bed," it combined with the image of Louise Brooks, and why not? There was a potential connection there. Could I write a story about it, somehow magically get them together, even let them develop a romance? I imagined that Fritz would have enjoyed such a notion.

What I had in mind was something like Bruce Sterling's story "Dori Bangs," which appeared in *Asimov's* in 1989. In that story, two people Sterling admired, Lester Bangs and Dori Seda, were given different outcomes for their lives, outcomes other than the sad, premature deaths both actually suffered. Leiber and Brooks both had long lives, but each had their share of missed opportunities and missteps. I thought perhaps I could at least give Fritz's memory an opportunity that he'd missed in life.

And yet. And yet. They refused to go along with it. I tried a couple of scenes, imagining them at different points in their lives, meeting, connecting, becoming friends or lovers. They refused to play along. I may be a god in this small space, but it seems there are limits even to what a god can do. At least this puny little god. The two of them were just too damn individual to follow any directives from the likes of me.

Entirely fair, of course, and a proper conceit. Pretensions of godhood aside, I'll just have to settle for what I can do.

The longest conversation I ever had with Fritz Leiber lasted less than an hour. It was in the lobby of some convention or another, but, for some reason, there were only the two of us there, just sitting in big, overstuffed chairs, talking about death.

Not just about death, of course. We were also talking about Jack London, age and decrepitude, and *Our Lady of Darkness*.

*Our Lady of Darkness* first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* as "The Pale Brown Thing." I consider it to be the best horror novel of the twentieth century, Stephen King and his many imitators notwithstanding.

*Our Lady of Darkness* is also Leiber's most autobiographical novel, at least insofar as the protagonist, Franz Weston, is concerned. Weston is an elderly gentleman, living alone in San Francisco, recovering from an epic relapse into alcoholism after the death of his wife. He becomes interested in events that seem to have transpired in early-twentieth-century San Francisco.

I'll not go into detail here, but the tale involves various members of the artistic circles surrounding Jack London, Clark Ashton Smith, and the invention of a new form of magic—Megalopolisomancy, or city magic. Weston becomes engrossed in his own scholarly research on the matter, to the point where he goes to bed each night with a "scholar's mistress," a pile of books beside him in the bed.

That doesn't turn out well, at least from a bibliophile's viewpoint.

In our conversation, Fritz and I spoke about one of Jack London's sayings: "Do you have the courage to stay up with the corpse?" What London meant by that was, "Do you have the courage to grow old?" To grow old with all that it implies, the slow decay, the loss of faculties, the erosion of sexual power and desire. If you are in love with life, what do you do when death comes beckoning?

London died young, in 1916, at the age of forty, unwilling to wait up with the corpse.

I think that Fritz expected to die in 1986, emulating Mark Twain: "I came in with the comet. I shall go out with the comet." That would be Halley's Comet, of course, whose light shone brightly at Fritz's birth. But the 1986 showing was a bit disappointing, since Halley's was on the other side of the sun at perihelion. In any case, Fritz outlived expectation by six years, and died in 1992.

I've thought about London's saying more than once, and certainly more often as I myself head into the years of age and decrepitude. You can die old or you can die young, and in the words of 'They Might Be Giants,' I hope that I get old before I die. To some, I'm old already, and there's no escaping the fact that I'll never be able again to do some of the things that came easily in my twenties and thirties.

But what can you do besides waiting up with the corpse? Nothing, really. And it's hard to see how it can be anything but a horror to watch the process. Ah, but. Suppose you have developed a taste for horror? Might that not give you an edge? And how about a sense of humor?

Some of the best horror tales have a comic bent to them. When you roll the bones with death, you're always playing against the house, so you might as well get a few chuckles along the way.

When my friend Karl Edward Wagner died several years ago, from a stomach hemorrhage due to chronic alcoholism, the message boards were thick with criticism of Karl's drinking. How dare he drink himself to death and deprive us of all the stories he might have written had he lived longer?

My reaction was interperate, I fear. I do not like to have someone's tragic death turned into a little pro-sobriety fable. Karl was who Karl was, and if he were not, he'd have been somebody else. Somebody who might not have written those stories, perhaps.

Leiber's case gives an even more problematic example. He lost years to intoxication, no doubt. But if he had been a teetotaler, who would have written "The Thirteenth Step," which takes place at an AA meeting? How about "Gonna Roll the Bones?" Would Helmut Adler have known how to send the directions to his son when he was lost in The Cat's Graveyard? Would Franz Weston have ever even lived in San Francisco, or anywhere else for that matter?

Again, it's more of that thing: People are who they are. They are not who you might want them to be. Sometimes you can get a glimpse of who they would like to be. Is that enough? Sometimes a writer can pull a doppelganger from a real person, like the time agents in Leiber's

"Change War" stories, and set that doppelganger into a new setting, give it a new life. Is that a real thing? Is the imagined character real in any way? If it is all an illusion, what isn't?

Louise Brooks finished out her life as a respected scholar-in-residence at the Eastman House in Rochester. She did not suffer fools gladly, right up to the end. She was scornful of many who came for the pilgrimage, finding them all too often to be mere celebrity seekers or lazy academics expecting her to do their work for them. Also, her health was fragile, and she had emphysema, which can make a person testy as they gasp for air.

So how would she have greeted an old man bearing the gift of an image of her in her youth? Hard to say for sure, but it might depend upon whether she had ever read any of his works.

I've failed in every attempt to create an alternate history for the two of them. On inspection, Leiber and Brooks led parallel lives, destined never to meet, except possibly in infinity. But somewhere there is a sculpture of incorruptible metal, made by one creative artist, on the commission of another artist, in praise of yet a third. I don't know who has it, but maybe someday I'll be able to tell a tale about it. You win some, you lose some, and you hope that at the end of the day, you have a decent bent in which to find your rest. ▲

James Killus lives in Pomale, California.

## Claude Lalumière Paul Di Filippo's *Lost Pages*: An Introduction

I so loved Paul Di Filippo's *Lost Pages* that I stole the name from him. And, nice guy that he is, Paul let me do it.

Paul's book *Lost Pages* is a collection of uchronic fiction, each story dealing with a different alternate history, a different vision of what might have been. In that sense, then, the pages in this book truly are lost pages—the lost pages of secret histories that never happened, deliriously transgressive dreams of worlds that almost were.

I find the implication behind the name "*Lost Pages*" thrilling and inspiring—ideas, stories, lives that are lost to consensus reality, invisible to the dominant worldview. And the best of Paul Di Filippo's fiction—including the stories in this volume—is all about such "lost pages": tales of visionary dreamers and bohemian iconoclasts who won't and/or can't participate in the propagation of the memes that contribute to creating an unjust world, who reject the notions that greed is more rewarding than love, that power is more fun than fucking, that you have to accept the world as it is handed to you. His characters enthusiastically love, fuck, dream, and strive to create worlds worthy of their imaginations and worthy of the more compassionate aspects of the collective human imagination—better worlds by far than what we've managed to come up with in "real" life.

It is because I find such personal resonance with the title *Lost Pages* that I stole it. The theft began in my story "Besiral Acts," which featured a mysterious bookshop called—what else?—*Lost Pages*. It was intended as a one-time homage to a book that fired my imagination (this very book I'm now introducing), but to my surprise the bookshop kept popping up until it became a central element in my fiction. My thievery extends even further. I also publish a webzine called *Lost Pages* <www.lostpages.net>. Paul was gracious enough to contribute an article to the second issue.

In many ways, *Lost Pages* is central to Paul Di Filippo's oeuvre. This collection showcases at least four principal characteristics of the author's work: (1) His fiction is encyclopedically erudite, featuring a wide range of literary and cultural influences processed through Paul's peculiar imagination. (2) It is relentlessly playful, abundantly generous in its efforts to entertain its audience. (3) It possesses an unabashed utopian streak, betraying a charmingly earnest belief that a better world is possible—a conviction tinged with just enough cynicism to let readers know that it is no easy task to achieve a better world when the monstrous forces of greed, intolerance, and conformity are marshaled against such a dream. And (4) it celebrates the revolutionary power of writing.

Unlike most uchronies penned by U.S. writers, *Lost Pages* doesn't

deal with such cliché and overused tropes as the U.S. Civil War and victorious Nazis. In this book, Paul invokes the authors whose dreams helped fuel his own. The stories in *Lost Pages* thus speculate on what would have happened if the lives of some of the twentieth century's most remarkable writers had taken altogether different paths than in our world. By doing so, he demonstrates his conviction that writing matters. Writers create and propagate memes that affect the construction of consensus reality. Remove or alter the source of those memes, and the world changes.

It is how integrally the entire book combines these four aspects that makes *Lost Pages* so crucial in Paul's bibliography.

Paul's obsessively broad erudition spills all over *Lost Pages*. And the mischievous glee with which he blends these disparate influences to create fascinatingly bizarre literary chimeras is perhaps the most widely recognized characteristic of his fiction. Paul indulges in this predilection more explicitly in *Lost Pages* than in any of his other books.

"What Killed Science Fiction?" is a sardonic pseudo-essay, in the manner of Stanislaw Lem, about a world in which the history of science fiction progressed somewhat differently, but which resonates all too familiarly with the sad state of affairs in our reality.

In "The Jackdaw's Last Case," Paul plunges Franz Kafka into the world of the 1930s hero pulp.

Anne Frank escapes the Nazis in "Anne"—and replaces Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"The Happy Valley at the End of the World" imagines an encounter between Antoine de Saint Exupéry and the young J. G. Ballard, delving into and exposing unexpected parallels and shared thematic concerns in the works of these two literary giants.

Robert A. Heinlein becomes president of the United States in "Maury Doats." The space program and civil liberties will never again be the same.

"Instability," a collaboration with gonzo mathematician and cyberpunk Rudy Rucker, imagines a strange confluence between three Beat writers (Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassidy) and two radical theorists (mathematician John von Neumann and physicist Richard Feynmann).

"World Wars III" recounts a day in the life of Thomas Pynchon, U.S. Navy, in a 1960s beset by a cataclysmic worldwide conflict, at a triple-bill USO concert featuring the Beatles, the Supremes, and Elvis.

"Linda and Phil" answers the (admittedly, infrequently asked) question, what if Linda Rosestadt and Philip K. Dick had gotten married?

"Alice, Alfie, Ted, and the Aliens" is a satirical homage to the U.S. branch of science fiction's New Wave—the movement that rocked the foundations of the genre in the 1960s—most especially the work of Alice Sheldon (better known under her nom de plume, James Tiptree, Jr.). It stars not only Sheldon, but other *avancé* garde of stalwarts such as Alfred Bester, Theodore Sturgeon, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, and Barry Malzberg. Readers who are not overly familiar with the lives and works of these authors might find this one utterly baffling, but it's actually quite funny if you know the references. The first time I was exposed to this story was at a public reading in 1997, and I was rolling on the floor, in pain from laughing so much and so hard.

And then there's "Campbell's World," which is, simply put, Paul's finest achievement so far—and one of the greatest of stories ever, a shining exemplar of the genre's transgressive and revolutionary potential. Regardless of how entertaining and imaginative all the other stories might be (and they are very much so), "Campbell's World" is enough to render *Last Pages* essential to any sci-fi library.

From a premise based on something of a pun, Paul weaves a utopian dream that celebrates—more euphorically and intelligently than anything I've ever encountered—the visionary power of science fiction. This story asks the question "What if mythology scholar Joseph Campbell, and not John W. Campbell, had assumed the

editorship of *Outstanding* in the 1930s?" In reality, when John W. Campbell took over the pulp magazine *Outstanding*, he, for better and for worse, shaped commercial sci-fi as we know it today: a past-due, lingering reflection of the U.S.A.'s postwar self-image. The two Campbells were very different men indeed, and as a result of this chronism takes on an altogether different character from the gang-bro, can-do, conservative/libertarian, colonializing, anthropocentric, androcentric, pro-American, and blindly-adherent-to-the-Western-scientific-worldview of that John W. Campbell popularized so efficiently and that still dominates the U.S. market. It becomes instead a radical, compassionate, multicultural, questioning literature that ultimately transforms the world into a utopia that exudes in the best possible way of a trademark sense of wonder.

That story made me yearn to live in the world it created. Unfortunately, I can't; it doesn't exist. At least, not yet. But by imagining it so vividly—by sharing those ideas with readers, by propagating these radical memes—Paul Di Filippo makes it that much more possible for a better world to come into being. ▶

*Claude Lalumière lives in Montreal, Quebec. This piece originally appeared as an introduction to the *Páginas Perdidas* edition of *Last Pages* (2004).*

## Jack Dann Autobiography of a Novel

I remember. . . I remember. . .

I was in my mid-twenties, living hard and sleeping little, and my life was consumed with the idea of being a writer. It was sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It was nicotine and caffeine and working all night on my manual Remington typewriter, feeding it page after page of correctable bond paper while I filled up my cheap, porcelain blue saucer of an ashtray with cigarette stubs.

I remember getting a call from a dear friend, a Swiss art critic who used to entertain high government officials, bankers, artists, executives, and film and theater people in his converted barn. He would also invite interesting people to orgasmic happenings where everyone wore masks and acted out under his Plexiglas roof. Well, it was the late '60s/early '70s, and—unlike James Dean—we were still all going to live forever.

I was writing a novella, in the heat of it, writing fifteen pages a day, trying in vain to emulate Thomas Wolfe, who, after a good day, was reputed to have gone striding down the street chanting, "I've written fifteen thousand words today, I've written fifteen thousand words today." My friend told me that he was entertaining someone I should meet and would I come over for a quick visit? I told him I was working. He told me his guest was Nick Ray, the director of *Rebel Without a Cause*. James Dean's director.

I was there in half an hour, and there, indeed, was Nick Ray, his hair curly and white, a rakish black patch over one eye—he had a malady known as lazy eye, but, as I grew to know him, I noticed that the patch came and went, depending on the occasion. His face was strong and craggy. His physique was thin, rangy, powerful. He was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt.

He was a grown-up version of James Dean.

We slouched in the middle of my friend's great, open room, the walls covered with paintings and etchings and lithographs and masks, the summer sun shafting and coruscating through windows and ceiling, two James Deans—James Dean the elder and James Dean the younger. They were two male macho prima donnas dressed in t-shirts and jeans, and for those few magical seconds, we were in a magical circle.

We both knew we were play-acting.

Nick: "I'm doing a motion picture."

Me: "Yeah."

Nick: "You interested in maybe taking a look at what we've got?"

Me: "Sure."

Nick nodded as the conversation went on, the James Deans slouching, glancing at each other with heavy lidded eyes, and then the moment was over and we were sipping our friend's sherry and talking, and no longer play-acting. As I remember that luminous, numinous

day over thirty years ago, I also remember another luminous day, standing on the balcony of a hotel overlooking Rodeo Drive with my editor. We had met in Los Angeles to work on final revisions for my Civil War novel *The Silent*. We were discussing new projects, and he said, "You know, we really need to think of a big idea for your next novel," and just then I remembered standing in that magic circle and play-acting with Nick, remembered all the arguments that had attended our brief relationship, the shifting of points of view, the wild chicken-run rides over country roads in his convertible, sitting alone in a dark room looking at the dailies of his film, and I said, "Well, James Dean was one of my teenage idols."

"Yeah. . ." he asked, and I said, joking, "I sort of think of myself as a grown-up James Dean."

We laughed, and it suddenly hit me as we looked down at the Merces and Rollers gliding like gold and silver sharks down Rodeo Drive, "What if James Dean had survived his famous crash on Highway 466? What if he lived to fulfill his acting career? What if he went into politics like Ronald Reagan? What if he beat Ronald Reagan in the gubernatorial election in California, and Reagan only became a footnote?"

At that point, my editor and I were jumping up and down on that tenth floor balcony like kids.

Well, we're old guys now. We're allowed to behave like kids.

*The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean* is about the construction of myths, the creation of history, and the nature of memory. It took me five years to write. I imagined it as *100 Years of Solitude* meets Hollywood; I imagined *Rapin' and The Great Gatsby* sistered together into a Hollywood novel. But I wasn't prepared for what the novel had in store for me. I have the sense, superstitious as it may be, that stories find the author, rather than authors finding their stories. This one came to me on the balcony of that hotel in L.A., but it was only when I started writing the novel that I began to understand I was in a sense writing my own history.

I'm an upstate New York expatriate living in Australia; and since I've been here, I've been writing about America. It's as if ten thousand miles of distance has brought me closer to home. *The Rebel* is a fictional biography of the pop culture that has molded and formed me.

I did extensive research for *The Rebel*, just as I did for *The Memory Cathedral* and *The Silent*, but the blood and bones of this book—the heart of this book—came out of my personal experience. I remember the '50s. I remember the icons, the poetry, the coffee houses, the bebop slang, the pegged pants and black motorcycle jackets and the beehive and duck-ast hards. I was living full out during the '60s, swept up in the politics and the counterculture (yet I also kept a hand in traditional

state and local politics). I met Timothy Leary, dropped out of law school, hung out with the hippies, swept through the Summer of Love, and was shaken, turned inside out, and transformed during the liberation movements of the '70s. And during the '80s and '90s I was involved in politics. I sat in smoke filled rooms working out strategies with spin-doctors, candidates, and pollsters. I recorded the background for this book minute-by-minute and hour-by-hour as a writer.

And as an actor.  
I trained in the Method espoused by the Actors Studio, and that's how I taught myself to write. I have to know the characters and background so completely that the line between the real and imagined becomes blurred. To that end, I immersed myself in secondary sources, biographies, autobiographies—as many primary sources as I could find. I remember a particularly interesting moment sitting in a café with Michael Engleberg, who produces films and maintains an active medical practice. I told Michael that I didn't believe Marilyn Monroe committed suicide and that I had had a brief discussion about Marilyn with Anthony Summers, author of *Goddess: Her Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe* and *The Kennedy Conspiracy*. "Summers believed that Monroe was murdered," Michael nodded. The shadow of a smile flickered across his face. "Jack, you do know that my father was Hyman Engleberg, Marilyn's physician?"

I had no idea. After I recovered my composure, I asked, "Do you think she committed suicide?"

"Yes," he said flatly.  
He was certain.  
Alas, I wasn't. . . .

I read and read, and remembered, and remembered. It was total immersion. My wife Janeen asked me when I might leave the '50s or '60s or '70s and return to the present . . . and be present; but the present had become ghostly. The past, the American past was becoming more and more substantial. Melbourne, the farm by the sea, this faraway place I have made my home had become tissue-thin; and I felt as if I were standing stock-still and listening, listening for the voices, eavesdropping on the past.

After I have immersed myself in a character and period, I listen, for the characters won't speak until I know them intimately. I'd read all the variant interpretations of who James Dean and Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley and Robert F. Kennedy really were—perhaps we are

all different beings to different people—and slowly, quietly, stealthily, I came to know James Dean and Marilyn and the others. One by one, over time, they began to whisper to me, a wild, luminous, synesthetic saturation. And as they whispered, I began to write; and as I began to write, they pressed and pushed against my outline, my arbitrary schematic for my book, which suddenly, miraculously became *their* book. (This, of course, is the superstition of this writer: the way the "Little Man"—my unconscious—and I interpret information and kindly that "restless urge to write.")

And this is the Jimmy—and Marilyn and Elvis and Jack and Bobby—who whispered to me.

A last note:  
I would not presume to bore the reader with a comprehensive list of sources, but a few books stand out. I recommend *The Fifties* by David Halberstam; *1968 In America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* by Charles Kaiser, *The Making of the President* series by Theodore H. White, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954-68* by Steven Kasher; *Robert Kennedy and His Times* by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* by Edmund Morris; *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956* and *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1957-1969*, edited by Ann Charters; *Lost Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley and Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* by Peter Guralnick; *A Life by Ella Kazan*; *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* by Donald Spoto; *Norma Jean: The Life of Marilyn Monroe* by Fred Lawrence Guiles; *The Assassination of Marilyn Monroe* by Donald H. Wolfe; *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe* by Anthony Summers; *Marilyn: Her Life In Her Own Words* by George Barris; *The Men Who Murdered Marilyn* by Matthew Smith; *Jimmy Dean on Jimmy Dean* by Joseph Humphreys, consultant; *James Dean: Little Boy Lost* by Joe Hyams with Jay Hyams; *Live Fast—Die Young: Remembering the Short Life of James Dean* by James Gilmore; *Rebel: the Life and Legend of James Dean* by Donald Spoto; *The Unabridged James Dean* by Randall Riese; *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean* by Paul Alexander; *James Dean: The Mounting King* by David Dalton; *The James Dean Story* by Ronald Martinetti; and *James Dean: The Biography* by Val Holley. ▶

Jack Dann lives outside Melbourne, Australia.

## Read This recently read and recommended by Jack Dann

### Books for Beginning Writers

I found these books helpful and thought you might, too.  
*Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brand: When I started writing, this book was out of print, and writers passed god-cared copies around. It was originally published in 1934, but if you can compensate for the dated psychology, you'll find that her suggestions actually work! I think this book should be in every writer's library.

*Fiction Writers Handbook* by Whit and Hallie Burnett: The Burnetts edited the prestigious *Story Magazine*, and they published the first work of Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, William S. Burroughs, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and Carson McCullers. This is a good solid book. Gardner Dozois and I wrote a very short chapter on writing science fiction for Hallie. If I had to choose between this book and *Becoming a Writer*, I would definitely go for *Becoming a Writer*.

*Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step By Step* by Edward de Bono: This is the first book by de Bono that made a stir. If I remember correctly, it was written for engineers. I have found it a very useful tool for generating ideas. I still think it's the best. de Bono is a hero of mine. I met him at a literary festival in Perth, and we schmoozed about life and the weather for a while. Later, my wife asked me what I had discussed with de Bono, and I asked, "Who?" Sign . . . I had no idea who I had been talking with.

*The Art of Fiction and On Becoming a Novelist* by John Gardner: I knew John. He was a lovely, generous man and a wonderful teacher. Although I have never been able to warm to his

fiction, the two books listed here should be on every writer's shelf. I should mention that in one of these books, John criticizes Harlan Ellison's prose style. But other than that isolated instance of critical timidity, these books are wonderful.

*I Have This Nifty Idea . . . Now What Do I Do With It?* *Writers Show You How They Sold Their Books From Outlines*, edited by Mike Resnick: Mike is a prolific, award-winning writer. He also edits a line for Five Star Press and is a prolific anthologist. He asked me if he could publish one of my novel outlines. I sent him an outline. What a strange, yet wonderful idea for a book for writers. This book will give you an idea of the diversity of approaches writers can take to sell their novels.

*The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White: This book, called affectionately "The Little Book" by experienced writers and writing teachers, is the one I suggest to anyone who wants to write. It is very concise and isn't burdened with a lot of difficult terminology. I would suggest rereading it at least once a year.

*How To Write a Blockbuster Novel* by Al Zuckerman: This is a terrific step-by-step course in plotting "big" popular novels. Al is Ken Follet's agent, and by using actual drafts of Ken Follet's outlines, he shows you how to work out plots and tighten them until they hum. This book might be hard to find, but it is well worth the trouble if you feel that is the kind of book you want to write. Al founded the literary agency Writers' House. I should probably tell you I might have a wee bias, as I'm one of their clients. ▶

Robert Reed  
Improbable Journeys



A man lives inside the most perfect spacesuit.

Built from some marvelous, probably mythical material, his suit is considerably tougher than any diamond. A tiny onboard AI serves as its guiding brain. Finger-sized reactors power an array of determined, self-repairing machines. The interior atmosphere is constantly scrubbed. Piss and shit are transmuted into brook water and an endless fear. In essence, the suit functions as a very small, highly competent spaceship. What is frail about this marvelous apparatus is the man living inside. Mortal and lost, drifting between the untouchable stars, his only companion is the enduring suit that has no purpose but to try its best to care for its lonely companion.

That desperate image found me when I first began to write, and it immediately struck me as being an intriguing situation for a little story. How did the poor bastard get himself into that awful fix? What was going to happen to him next? Rescue would be the only worthwhile goal in most science fiction; my plucky human would eventually contrive some intensely clever means to save himself. But success is a more adaptable creature. What if he was never saved? How could any soul, trapped in such horrid circumstances, find happiness, or at least a measure of peace?

Like most of my story ideas, this one went nowhere.

What I needed was a second insight. That came some years later with the simple realization that the spacesuit was much like a world, self-contained and eternal. The man trapped inside could die, but life would persist. Each of us is an being in which trillions of microbes swim. Under the guiding hand of the onboard AI, the bacteria could evolve, a host of new species learning to interact with one another, building a community of organisms—a tiny self-directed world—that after millions of years would very much resemble the dead man.

From this, I wrote "Coffins," which appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in December, 1992. And that could have been the end of it. It was a stand-alone story that satisfied me and a few readers. But at some point during the writing, the story split for me. I began thinking about more durable types of human beings, people who were these elaborate "lifestyles" throughout their long, long lives. I saw them as a society, a kind of nation onto themselves. But where would these odd souls live? What environment could possibly make sense to a people who were so damned strange?

Of course, I thought. They would live clinging to the hull of a starship.

And a little starship wouldn't do the trick. I needed something with size, some expansive place where a great culture could be born, and because the mind's eye doesn't require capital and needs only a glancing nod at what is possible, I quickly sketched out my first plans for a ship that was as large as a world.

"The Remoras" appeared in *F&SF* in May 1994, and with that, the Great Ship was launched.

Imagination should be a sloppy business. If I had begun this obsession with clear goals and meticulous plans, the result would have been a smaller, more prosaic machine. Of course humans weren't the ship's builders; that much seemed obvious from the first words. Our species must have found the prize drifting as a relic, uninhabited and free for the taking. But I didn't concern myself with origins or age. I assumed the ship was the grand equivalent of an ocean liner—the pride of some alien species that bankrupted itself with its own ambition. The human usurpers were simply fulfilling the ship's original intent, steering the big vehicle through a long lazy voyage, its immortal crew and passengers planning to circumnavigate the Milky Way during the next few hundred millennia.

Star travel has to be a difficult business. The energy demands and financial sacrifices surely keep most species sitting at home, building big eyes instead of big engines. And even if starships were possible, they would bring enormous risks. I'm not a natural physicist; I don't think in terms of ergs and megatons. But I possess, even cherish, a highly refined paranoia. A flock of dust would be horrible news for

some little starship, and impacts should be inevitable. Struck by a wayward comet, ships as big as asteroids would be gutted like trout. But of course a truly gigantic ship could weather this abuse, and if the ship was encased inside a frozen ocean of superstrong hyperfiber . . . well, what better vessel was there with which to journey around the neighborhood?

Alien species would pay fortunes for berths onboard the Great Ship. The captains would have to be careful about who and how many came onboard. "I need a good strange alien," I told myself. So the next story was my attempt to create a memorable Gaian—a self-aware, utterly self-absorbed biosphere—and once I invented one Gaian, I thought, "Why not two of them?"

I was successful or I wasn't. But it was the human characters that stuck with me afterwords. Pamir was named for the Asiatic mountain range—a big homely man possessing several flavors of strength as well as a gruff nature and a crippling indifference to convention. Washen served as a useful contrast to my protagonist—lovely and elegant, and always politically adept. She was named "Washen" for no memorable reason. Both of them were captains. Both served the ship, though with quite different attitudes. They had a romantic past, and they were very nearly immortal, and by the end of the story, they had shared an odd sort of child.

The first editor to see the story rejected it. Pamir was just too unlikely, I was told—an impression that rather pissed off the Pamir inside me. I mentioned my troubles to a fellow writer, Rob Chilson. Laughing, he suggested sending the story to Gardner Dozois, since he rather likes unlikely characters. And that's why *Analog's* published "Aeon's Child" in November 1995.

Two stories had been written in this still unnamed universe, with hints of another dozen occurring to me. Little intuitions made the ship into an increasingly real place. With no clear goal in mind, I would wonder about its construction and true size, and how many species might be walking and swimming and flying along its broad avenues. And then out of the proverbial blue, I found myself asking if my big ship ever carried cargo—a secret and mysterious cargo, naturally—and was that cargo still on board, and where might that peculiar treasure be hiding?

The ship's deepest core seemed ripe for exploring.

And a moment later, or maybe the next day, I thought up this carefully hidden world that I named for the place in the body that gives birth to blood.

"Marrow" was published in *SF Age* in July 1997. I don't have any great love for the work; for my tastes, it's too compressed inside its twenty-plus thousand words. But the novella garnered a certain favorable attention. Particularly from my editor at Tor Books, Jim Frenkel, who mentioned that with work and a modest dose of steroids, the story could become a happy and well-adjusted novel.

Perhaps I could just flesh out the original story, Jim suggested. Unless I wanted to write a larger story, of course.

I have a boyish fondness for expansive, rambling tales.

While I was writing *Marrow* (Tor Books, July 2000), the Great Ship finally began to feel like a real place to me—a vast ensemble of things ancient and modern, unknown and boundless. Once again, I had the opportunity to explore Marrow, as if for the first time. Plus I had room enough and every good reason to bring back the important characters from the earlier stories. Quee Lee and Perri. Orleans. And my favorite, Pamir. As in the novella, I kept Washen at the story's center—an ambitious captain and a key member of the expedition to the hidden world. Her character is likeable enough. She happens to be smarter than me and infinitely more capable, and her love for the Great Ship can never be doubted. But in my mind, the face that dominates that novel is narrow and severe. Miocene is a bitch, and what a bitch. She is difficult and prickly, full of herself and her personal advancement. I genuinely admire that creature. She has endless energy and a titanic sense of purpose. But ambition thickens her blood. Power

is the breath that gives life, and that life endows her with a tragic quality. She can be relentless, achieving goals impossible for everyone else, yet she is utterly and profoundly blind. And in all those good storytelling ways, I find *Marrow* to be wondrously interesting.

Every writer has his favorites, and among my novels, *Marrow* is not at the top of the list. But it's far from last place, and without question, I prefer the big novel to the hypercompressed novella. Where *Marrow* ultimately fails, at least for me, is in certain little places. Without too much elaboration, I'll just say that I didn't do Miocene justice, that at the end of her story, by rights, everything should have been told from her doomed point of view; and in the years since I wrote those final scenes, her angry narrow face has done nothing but glare at me.

Man as a whole world; then a world as a single soul; followed by a world hiding within a much larger body.

These were the first three stories in the *Marrow* universe, and when the novel was finished, I took a contractor's break, concentrating on a variety of other projects. I like to maintain lists of future works—proposed titles, each title with a pencil dot set beside it when I feel I understand what I'm going to do. The to-do's typically cover a page of legal paper, in two semi-narrow columns. Every New Year's morning, I sharpen a #2 pencil and make a fresh list, carrying over unfinished and unsold stories from the previous year as well as every half-idea, some of which might be twenty years old by now.

Lately I've endured a certain fascination with the Many Worlds theories. There are reasons—good, quantum mechanical, cosmologically explicit reasons—to believe that infinity is real, in one fashion or another. Everything that is possible is inevitable, and by consequence, everything miraculous happens too often to be counted.

What is true for worlds would be true for humans too.

I can wonder: What if I had happened upon the Great Ship earlier in my professional life? And then, what if I had steered my discovery on a more profitable course?

Gardner Dozois, the seminal editor of short sf, offers sage advice for new authors hungry for substantial careers. Focus on a single future history. Write a series of potent stories in that universe. And then sell quickly to the major markets. Everybody loves the fresh new kid. Exploding into existence is the surest way to gain an immediate, passionate following. Then you earn a fat contract for a first novel set in your universe, and because your publisher has ponied up a healthy advance, every effort is made to get your book noticed, which can lead to good or excellent sales figures, which in turn feeds your rapid ascent.

This was never my route into the business. Robert Reed stories are typically hermits, alone and perhaps a little ill-tempered, dependent only on themselves. My novels have been stand-alones, except for *Beyond the Veil of Stars* (1994) and its sequel, *Beneath the Gates of Sky* (1997). And instead of exploding into the sf consciousness, I have gradually accreted what passes for a career, slowly and erratically adding layers to a resume that somehow includes more than a hundred short stories and novelettes and novellas, plus a couple handfuls of novels.

But of course, if the Infinite is real, then I am just one among the multitude. There is surely this other version of me: In his impressionable twenties, he enjoys an epiphany. Walking down a great long cavern, he sees a realm empty and cold, ancient beyond all reckoning. Then he climbs out onto the hull of what he realizes is a world-sized ship. Rocket nozzles taller than any mountain rise from the stern, while standing on the prow, he sees the Milky Way gradually reaching up to swallow a great and abandoned ship, which really, in the greater glory of the cosmos, is just a very small if rather fancy bit of grit. And then this alternate version of myself wanders deep inside the ship, discovering *Marrow* waiting at the core, and with that, the rest of the new writer's professional life is set.

And then something more or less inevitable happens: Smart business sense stands aside the epiphany. In a multitude of alternate realms, I make the simple, well-calculated decision to write a great fat epic in which good souls are obviously good and some equally obvious and quite ugly evil threatens the universe at every turn. Throw in a dose of imagination and the occasional wonder, and what follows is a reliable, domesticated success.

All things possible must be inevitable.

Of course if the Great Ship is possible, in whatever form, there is some perfectly ordinary mutation of our universe that places me inside its great chambers and long avenues, not writing an epic so much as simply recounting the days and millennia of a personal journey.

And I mention this, not so much to offer a window on any personal wish fulfillment, or in contrast to the smallness of my own life. My intention here is to offer one small observation:

Journeys, no matter how small, will pass through space and through time, but always the largest portion of any voyage transpires through that endless ocean of what is possible.

When I began working on *Marrow*, I knew the plot would end differently from the novella. I was a writer trying to fill more pages, and given this second chance, I wanted to iron out a few of the problems that bothered me in the first effort. But the rewrite has evolved into something else. At the end of the novella, night descends on *Marrow* while Washen waits in the base camp above, and once the protective buttresses weaken enough, my protagonist falls through the great black night, eager to help her grandchildren and their wounded world. But in the novel, the events leading up to that critical moment happen a few decades earlier. Again, Washen and Miocene climb to the Great Ship, discovering that nothing has changed in their absence. But the ensuing fight doesn't happen at the base camp, but instead up inside the leech habitat, thousands of kilometers removed from *Marrow*. Washen is left for dead, and she is eventually reborn, and what happens next and next and next after that will keep her onboard the Great Ship, leaving her grandchildren on *Marrow* to their own devices.

Two similar stories, but not identical. Which one is the true account? Or are they equally valid in the eyes of Creation?

I've been wondering that for myself.

In a muddled, undisciplined way, my work has started to embrace that Many Worlds attitude—both inside the *Marrow* universe, and in some of my other stories, too. I wrote "Night of Time" for *The Silver Gryphon* anthology (Golden Gryphon Press, 2003) specifically as a nod to that everything-that-can-happen-happens attitude. An historian of great age and exceptional brilliance is a passenger onboard the Great Ship. He and his apparently simple minded assistant visit a professional interrogator named Ash—a human who specializes in recovering old memories—and certain unexpected memories are uncovered. The action, what there is of it, happens in the ages before *Marrow*. I don't know exactly when. The voyage lasted for tens of thousands of years before things went catastrophically wrong, and this little story concerns some quiet events during one forgotten day. And what that one story means to the entire *Marrow* cycle, I don't know. I'm playing a game with myself. I ask a few what-ifs, and then I see how they play out, and later, perhaps, I'll use whatever I discovered to be the most fun.

One immediate payoff has come from an unexpected source, at least unexpected to me.

Hyperfiber.

I first used this bit of shorthand out of laziness. Pure, undiluted sloth. The stuff is everywhere onboard the Great Ship; its skin and bones are woven from the very best grades of this miracle product. I didn't think often about its qualities. I suppose I was originally working on the assumption that hyperfiber is something tough and lightweight but fundamentally ordinary. Buckytubes woven around odd quantum doodads, or some such nonsense. But when I started writing the sequel to *Marrow*, I decided to look again at these assumptions, and could there be some better, richer explanation for this critical substance?

The key is in the name, I decided.

A fiber of any kind, nylon or glass or whatever, reaches out through space, and it endures, however briefly, inside time. But what if my superfiber extends into odder regions than normal space and time? What about other dimensions? Or better, what if the hull of the ship reaches into shadow realms and other, equally valid realities?

Its impossible strength, in part, is something borrowed from other realms. When I saw this possibility, a little more became obvious to me. If a comet strikes the hull, the hyperfiber borrows its strength from a multitude of alternate realities. The material isn't infinitely



strong, but it can suffer fantastic damage, and afterwards it can heal its smallest wounds, at least to a point. But just as important, my little epiphany helps explain why it has been so very difficult to determine the hyperbiter's true age, and why a multitude of supposedly bright souls can ride around inside the ship, unable to guess that their home is nearly as old as the universe.

The "hyper" in hyperbiter refers to the odd, long reach of the stuff, its foundation laid in the hyperreals. Not that the theoretical underpinnings should matter to the ship's passengers or even most of the crew. Really, how many modern people can explain why Damascus steel was so exceptional? But the same rough explanation might shed light on another feature of the Great Ship—it's very soft but thoroughly genuine voice.

I first used that voice in *Marrow* as a gimmick. I wanted to give the ship a sense of identity as well as a tangible dread about what is to come. But readers and critics took the voice seriously, which helped me do the same.

In the Many Worlds theory, each of us is vaster than we can know. We exist as a multitude, and despite hopeful noise from a few souls, I suspect we cannot feel our other selves, even in the most glancing fashion. But hyperbiter is rather different. When our Great Ship is struck by a comet—a massive body moving with the apparent velocity of one-third light speed—a trillion other ships feel the impact and help defend its worst effects. But what if that isn't the only time when these avenues of transmission exist? And if not, what kinds of forces and subtle voices might propagate into our tiny realm?

I haven't done more than hint at these possibilities in my stories. At least to date, I haven't. But this is the kind of intriguing half-notion that makes me wonder what obvious oddity will strike next.

Queen Lee was not meant to be Asian. For me, her name has a pleasant sound, and it implied a certain old-family heritage. But she was supposed to be a child of the deep future, immune from the racial stereotypes of our little day. Really, it is a conceit to believe that in ten or twenty generations there will be any human that looks genuinely Chinese or Swedish. Yet the cover art for "The Remoras" gave her a racial sense, and that triggered a line of thought. At several points during the writing of these stories, I found it useful to give my readers and myself roots that extend back towards our present. Queen Lee is the taproot. She was born into our world, or at least born sometime in this century. She can remember when she was a child, and telescopes pointed at the sky found a signal made by another intelligent species, full of fresh knowledge and visions of a thickly populated galaxy; and within a genuinely short while, life on little Earth was transformed in a multitude of ways.

Queen Lee was the first character in these stories, and sometimes it feels as if she will be the last one standing on stage, too.

I keep returning to her and her pretty husband, Perri. Perri is ridiculously useful. He knows the Great Ship better than any other entity, and he knows its shadowy people and memorable allies, and in his long life he has embraced just enough danger to visit gladly the odd and intriguing corners of the vessel, where manageable hazards might kill his body from time to time, but only temporarily.

How could any marriage, particularly between such different souls, endure for tens of thousands of years?

To me, that type of emotional stability—the intimate bond between any two souls—seems as unlikely as a lightweight maroon-colored substance that endures thirteen billion years of abuse from hard radiation and comet impacts.

"River of the Queen" is set some time a millennium after "The Remoras." Both lovers are ancient, yet delightfully young. They are enjoying a vacation in a life full of vacations, visiting an alien realm that I dreamed up from an assortment of places. In the Earth's past, due to the vagaries of a dimmer sun and the arrangement of the continents, ice ages were probably extraordinarily deep and intense. The Snowball Earth hypothesis has evidence supporting it. But more important to me, I would bet three car payments that countless worlds in our own neighborhood are caught in a cycle of deep snow punctuated with intense greenhouse summers. How could life adapt to such abuse? On the Earth, organisms remained small and apparently simple, blossoming into an array of new phyla when the cold cycles finally

ended. But if the cold hadn't ended, and if the biosphere couldn't or wouldn't regulate its thermostat... well then, what kind of species and societies would prosper in that kind of endless catastrophe?

But mostly "River of the Queen" (*FS&F*, February 2004) revolves around the happy couple as they enjoy a little adventure—the kind of bracing event that might serve as a mortar that locks them together. Despite being a wealthy old woman accustomed to privilege and comfort, Queen Lee is plucky and adaptable. Her husband still looks and acts like a boy, but in every deep way, he can never stop loving his wife. And by growing more comfortable with the couple—by erecting and polishing a more sophisticated image of them—I was able to put myself into a useful posture to write about them in the next novel—my sequel to *Marrow*.

But first, there is "Mere."

Agnes Ag, I worked on a half-conceived story that couldn't seem more distant from *Marrow* and the Great Ship. Set on the near future Earth, the tale concerned a plain young woman and a much older man. He was an aging veteran, a survivor of Vietnam, while she was the victim of some kind of sexual abuse. Her job, as I best remember it, was to hunt for a rare species of trout in the Gila Mountains of New Mexico. The man was retired, but his hobby was excavating Native American sites. (I once met an old guy who did the same work, but what seemed like an exotic hobby in the '70s has become legally and morally tacky.) Anyway, the woman drives up to his campsite, and for no particular reason that comes to mind, she lingers. And with her watching, he digs into what he believes to be an ordinary grave, but instead of a human body, he finds an alien set of bones.

And then what happens?

I never found an answer that meant anything to me. Every attempt at the story died at this point. What happens next? And how does it relate to the injured people who find that stranger's body so far from its home? But I always intended to supply an answer, which was why for more than a decade I kept the story on my active list.

For a temporary reprieve, I used the woman's name.

Jane Mere.

I returned to the general idea recently. What I liked best was that name and the poignant sense of a person deeply wounded. Perhaps I'd have better luck if I used the Great Ship as my setting. I quickly carved out a cavern, creating a landscape inspired by the Southwest, and some vaguely realized version of Mere went into the cavern to learn why a certain alien species had abruptly gone extinct.

The "Jane" name had vanished. Ship names are usually singular, though I suspect most of the humans have enormous full names—great rambling collections of syllables and odd accents built upon their very long lives. I knew that Mere carried a great pain from her past, and that she worked for the ship's captains as a kind of cross-species scout. Not as a diplomat, and not as a pure xenobiologist, but as a person with a profound, genuinely artistic capacity to see the universe through alien eyes and minds. And she wasn't just an idle invention; I was planning to use her in the upcoming sequel of *Marrow*. With great hope, I began to write, and I might have managed two or three pages, probably more than once, before the story looked at me and asked, "You don't know shit, do you?"

One blessing brought by gray hair and experience is that I usually know right away that I am lost. I also find it easier to point out problems with any story and contrive fixes. Maybe not perfect fixes, and maybe they don't satisfy everyone. But when I write, I am the audience, as long as the work keeps me willing to put my butt down and keep writing... well, that's most of what I require from my own work.

At the beginning of the aborted story, Washen met with my Mere, giving her the hard awful news that a favorite species had abruptly and inexplicably vanished from existence.

What about the odd woman's origins, I asked myself. How did she become so attuned to alien sensibilities? And why is she so slight? And perhaps most important, how did she acquire that perfectly descriptive name?

Bad stories can become good ones if you turn them on their heads—a little trick I learned some thousand years ago. When I began again, I focused on Mere's origins. In a sense, I rewrote my old story "Coffins," but I made my passenger even lonelier and more lost. What

little I knew about the dead aliens remained. Then I added enough else, I hoped, to draw a reasonable sketch of the species. Their name—Tila—is not just one of those sf nonsense words. It's also my little nod to the story's origins. I would have called them the Gila, but that would have been too obvious. And I made the Tila into a blend of things familiar and strange—smallish humanoids that resembled us, yet looked upon reality in ways we can never manage.

Despite vanishingly small odds, Mere was guaranteed to reach the Great Ship, at least inside one slender and very unlikely reality.

With every word, I assumed that the story would finish inside one of the ship's giant ports. The long-suffering woman would finally meet the tall and regal captain, Washen offering her a warm smile as she welcomed Mere into the new realm.

The Tila had different ideas.

The best decisions happen inside me, without conscious calculations. I write, and I watch what is happening in the story, and if I am lucky, the story ceases to be mine.

I was already envisioning that first meeting between captain and refugee—the start of a long prosperous relationship for both of them—but then I watched the wise and doomed aliens break their little god's limbs, and they said what they said, and I saved the file, and with that, my workday was finished.

The *Marrow* sequel has worn several names: *The Great Ship*.

*Marrow 2: The Sward of Creation.* (Which is much too much like a fantasy title for me, and I hope it vanishes.) Then most recently, *Creation's Razor*.

Mere was imagined so that I could use her in that novel.

For a fact portion of 2003, I was writing the sequel, and more to the point, I was building everything about it from scratch. With *Marrow*, I had the novella as a template. But the new book had to be original throughout. Many of the same characters appeared, but in new circumstances. I wanted to tell what happens after *Marrow* and next after that, and I had a good deal of fun with it. Mere is essential to the story, becoming one of my favorite characters in the process. Human but not, impossibly lucky as well as heroically plucky, at some level she realizes what the dead Tila knew for certain: Life is a voyage through space and time as well as through other realms. We travel across possibilities, and everything is inevitable, and some mighty things lie in all our futures.

About these weighty issues, I intended to write more, giving you readers a few more little hints about the next novel.

But suddenly, it seems as if I have told just enough, or maybe too much. And this, I am afraid, is where this odd little ramble needs to end. ▶

Robert Reed lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. This piece was originally written as an afterword to a collection forthcoming from Golden Griffin.

## James Morrow Once Upon a Time in the Future: Science Fiction and the Storytelling Movement

*Once upon a time there was a futuristic prison system that did not lack transgressors behind bars but instead issued each convict a two-year-old orphan to nurture. . . .*

From the instant that Joramund Flax, recently found guilty of armed robbery and tax evasion, was given his two-year-old, he was determined to beat the system. But Joramund was not long cast into the caregiver role before realizing that, even though he was occupying his own convivial apartment and no longer depressing penitentiary, he was in fact a prisoner. His life was not some his own. He had to watch over pretty little Fleep Vipond constantly. The runny-nosed runt was always putting himself in life-threatening situations, and furthermore. . . .

Wait a minute. Wait a minute. "Once upon a time there was a futuristic prison system?" Huh? Come again? Isn't that a rather oxymoronic way to begin a story?

Whatever the merits of the narrative hook I have just presented—which happens to be the premise of "Ball and Chain," my newest sf parable-in-progress—they have little to do with the contemporary storytelling movement. Right? However compelling the themes and tropes that inform my projected tale, they enjoy no compelling connection with the world of face-to-face oral narrative. Isn't that obvious?

Well, yes, and no, and maybe.

When I first began ruminating on the burgeoning storytelling movement and how it relates to my own medium of expression, I found that I could focus only on the gap between oral narrative and sf. But the more I thought about it, the narrower the rift became, and it now seems to me that, if storytellers and sf writers don't work the same side of the street, we at least live in the same neighborhood.

To explain how I arrived at this conclusion, I must first list some of the obvious differences—obvious to me, anyway—between sf and oral narrative.

1. Whereas the storyteller employs settings readily conjured in the reader's imagination, the sf writer is largely in the business of world-building.

In rendering the environment in which his or her story occurs, the sf writer must typically start from scratch, if not *af* scratch. As I go about composing "Ball and Chain," I'll have to throw in enough

gritty particulars to persuade the reader that this is all happening in a functional, plenary, lived-in urbanized future. There are times when I envy the storyteller, who can instantly access the European medieval limbo that lies along the periphery of our Western collective consciousness. The teller says, "There was once a woodcutter who had three daughters"—and, bang, she has instantly connected with the audience.

2. Whereas storytelling draws upon pretechnological traditions, *sf* is a child of the Industrial Revolution.

Kurt Vonnegut once remarked—that is a rough paraphrase—that a science fiction writer is simply a fiction writer who's noticed that we live in the Age of the Machine. Often as not, our subject is some scientific innovation, or more specifically the impact of some scientific innovation on the human psyche, and by extension the human community. The world of "Ball and Chain" is, among other things, a technological environment. It assumes the invention of "objective" data-gathering instruments whereby the physical and emotional well-being of each orphan child might be evaluated.

3. Whereas the crises that drive an oral narrative are normally local in their effects, an *sf* narrative typically plays out on a large canvas.

The storyteller and the sf writer both count transformation among their central themes, but the changes dramatized in an oral narrative tend to be circumscribed: a kingdom is cursed, a village is spared, a miscreant is redeemed, a hero's pluck is rewarded, a heroine's tenacity pays off. In the *sf* medium, the change often occurs on a grand scale, as entire species, societies, planetary civilizations, and even galactic empires are swept into political cataclysms and technological cataclysms. "Ball and Chain" would probably lose its satiric edge if my hypothetical prison system was simply a tentative experiment undertaken by a small town. As I flesh out the story, I shall almost certainly imply that the innovation is universal.

4. Whereas the storytelling tradition allows for magical thinking and happily assumes an animistic universe, *sf* appeals to the reader's rational side.

SF author Phil Klass, who wrote dozens of satiric, morally charged stories in the 1950s under the pen name William Tenn, has wittily

defined science fiction as "the mass literature of the very few." And chief among the minority aspects of it is that it is unembarrassed by rationality. Unlike the postmodern secular left, the Darwin-demonizing religious right, and the spiritually-obsessed New Age fringe, science fiction writers generally think that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a good idea. The central conceit behind "Ball and Chain" draws upon post-Enlightenment notions of social engineering. While the premise is obviously playful, my hypothetical prison system is wholly consistent with the laws of physics and the scientific worldview.

#### 5. Whereas storytelling looks to the past, it celebrates the future.

Even when giving us a manifestly contemporary narrative, the storyteller is continually tapping into the venerable energy of a vanished past, the universe of sagas, legends, fables, and folklore. Implicit in this allegiance is a tacit critique of modernity, most especially those aspects of modernity that social critic Lewis Mumford collectively calls the megamachine—the modern Moloch of technological efficiency, with its calamitous contempt for local knowledge, native crafts, and regional traditions. The sf writer navigates by a different compass. His magnetized needle points him toward the future, which he embraces with the kind of qualified optimism that the late Jacob Bronowski termed "scientific humanism." My story-in-progress, when finished, will offer a scheme for a more humane prison system. It's not a remotely practical scheme, of course, but that's not the point. My goal is to indulge in a bit of utopian thinking while simultaneously constructing a feminist argument about the difficulty of raising children in today's highly individualistic society. Even the robust and valuable dystopian tradition within sf carries an optimistic subtext: things don't have to turn out this way.

Having gone to some trouble to distinguish the storytelling movement from the science fiction field, I shall now attempt to heal the breach.

The first link I'd like to forge between the two idioms concerns the complex and bedeviling issue of "style"—the mode of a story's presentation. In the oral tradition and the sf medium alike, the conventional distinction between form and content remains both valid and useful. It's difficult to think of either an oral tale or an sf story whose aesthetic impact is utterly and inextricably bound up with the author's line-by-line, word-by-word, comma-by-comma stylistic decisions.

In other words, at some point while preparing a narrative for its intended audience, both the storyteller and the sf writer cease to be interested in the more careful sorts of verbal virtuosity. At a certain juncture, the manner of the tale recedes, and the matter of the tale takes on a life of its own. The essence of "The Emperor's New Clothes" or Jesus' "Prodigal Son" parable would survive across a wide range of diction choices—and so would the essence of Isaac Asimov's "The Last Question," Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God," Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," and my own "Ball and Chain." To be sure, sf boasts within its ranks a goodly number of linguistic magicians—Lucius Shepard, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, John Crowley, Karen Joy Fowler, Michael Bishop, and Nalo Hopkinson come immediately to mind—but such talents have never been the *sine qua non* of the field.

I would contrast this situation with a recent literary phenomenon: the nearly universal acclaim that greeted Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, quite possibly the most brilliantly written book I've read since *Lolita*. The effect of *The Corrections* is entirely, and I mean entirely, a function of its Carnegie Hall prose. It tells of a family of upper-middle-class monsters—not interesting monsters, as in Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, just monsters—whose grotesquely selfish agendas periodically connect and disconnect over the course of 566 delectable pages. There's not an iota of affection in *The Corrections* for anything or anybody. From the first dazzling sentence to the last, Franzen revels in a kind of narcissistic misanthropy that, for all its perverse appeal, strikes me as being wholly discontinuous with both the storytelling movement and the sf field. The novel has nothing to say (beyond some banal observations about the loss of individual sovereignty in the postmodern world), but by God, Franzen is second

to none when it comes to making a sentence dance. I detested the book.

Before attempting to connect science fiction and oral narrative at a deeper level, I want to dispel what I regard as the most common misconception concerning sf as a literary form. My chosen medium is often called a "genre," a term suggesting that it is analogous in ambition and social function to the western, the romance, the detective novel, the technothriller, the pseudo-Arthurian epic, or the Stephen King horror extravaganza. I have come to feel that sf—along with a great deal of children's and adult literature published under the label "fantasy"—is nothing of the kind.

In the unequivocal genres, the writer signs an implicit contract with his or her reader: I shall give you this much ambiguity and no more . . . I shall frustrate you to this degree and no more . . . I shall punish my characters to this degree and no more . . . I shall not chop up my hero and feed the pieces to a pack of rabid mutant weasels staging a revival of *Oklahoma!* . . . I shall bring everything to an emotionally satisfying conclusion. The sf writer dangles no such contract before the reader's eyes. (I'm speaking now of genuine science fiction and not media tie-in *Star Wars* sludge or cargo-cult Tolkien imitations.) Rather, the reader comes to a novel or a story collection labeled "science fiction" precisely because the medium is at base *terra incognita*. The reader turns back the cover seeking neither verbal pyrotechnics, nor a comforting plot arc, nor a reassuring worldview. He or she wants something else.

What is this something else? I would call it simply "a way of looking at the world": more specifically, a *mythic* way of looking at the world—not mythic in the sense of supernatural explanation, but mythic in the sense of poetic elucidation. A valuable sf narrative renders some piece of the larger cosmic mystery momentarily intelligible and discussable. This process was perhaps most memorably dramatized by Edgar Allan Poe in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," which tells of a sailor who frees himself from a whirlpool by transcending his panic and contemplating the workings of the vortex. Poe's mariner takes the conventional, socially sanctioned notion of a maelstrom—confusion worse confounded, Charybeis gone berserk—and transforms it into a liberating myth: the whirlpool as comprehensible creature, a Charybeis willing to share her secrets. Like a good sf writer, the mariner replaces chaos with mythic coherence.

And when we speak of myth this way—as poetic elucidation, as creative interaction with the mysterious—where, exactly, are we? I would argue that we're smack dab in the middle of the oral narrative tradition. We're right up against "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," "Perseus and Medusa," "Sleeping Beauty," "Androcles and the Lion," "The Good Samaritan," and a thousand other stories in which a conscious moral agent confronts or unleashes some demonic-erotic-amoral force, occasionally internal, usually external, with results that, depending on the condition of the protagonist's soul—pure, inchoate, deformed—prove either redemptive or ruinous.

To make this point in more sociological terms, I would note that the best works to emerge from both the sf field and the oral narrative tradition defy the comfortable categories that enable the mandarin to sustain his hostility toward popular art. The same reductionists who want the storytelling movement to be nothing but didactic children's parables about elves and invisibility cloaks are equally pleased to dismiss as low-text space opera featuring robots and monsters. But the big losers, of course, are the mandarins, with their refusal to understand that, when the storyteller and the sf writer are on their respective games, those invisibility cloaks and robots and other seemingly unsophisticated trappings acquire mythic meanings that speak directly to the adult mind.

Whenever I attempt to list my favorite science fiction novels, three titles always make the cut: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and George Orwell's 1984. The value of each novel, I would argue, lies in its status as a modern myth. Shelley, Wells, and Orwell gave us vocabularies for discussing conundra about which we'd previously been obligated to remain mute or, at best, inarticulate.

*Frankenstein* is subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*. By keying her novel to the exploits of that most audacious of Titans, Shelley

transcended the norms of the Gothic thriller to provide her readers with an unprecedented literary experience. For all his horrific trappings, *Frankenstein* is essentially a sustained meditation on sin, love, exile, loneliness, parental obligation, and—most significantly—the dawning power of science to disturb the universe.

*The Island of Dr. Moreau* evokes another Greek myth, the narrative of Daedalus, who supervised the conception of that half-man, half-bull creature called the Minotaur. Recasting Victor Frankenstein's ambition on a grand scale, Dr. Moreau, the modern Daedalus, fashions not a single artificial being but a demented and dysfunctional ecosystem of chimeras. Moreau's determination to play God drove him insane—an insanity not without relevance to any attempt to discuss the contemporary revolution in the biological sciences.

In 1984, George Orwell takes his readers to hell—a man-made political hell in which all meaning, affective and linguistic, has been systematically shorn from the world. Much of the novel's power derives from its resonance with earlier, more manifestly mythic accounts of life among the damned. At one point in the *Épique of Gilgamesh*, the quasi-divine hero communes with the inmates of

eternity, all of them doomed to eat mud, drink bitumen, and indulge in pointless reminiscence amid dust and shadows. Orwell's nightmare future feels much the same. "We are the dead," say Winston and Julia.

There are other, more sociological parallels between the storytelling movement and the sf field. Each enterprise is, like so many minority passions, rather clabby and sometimes even cultish in ambience. Each has spawned an infrastructure centered around a system of regional and national conventions featuring panels, presentations, and dealer's rooms. Indeed, I could probably write a second essay comparing the storytelling community with the culture of science fiction.

For now I must break off these musings and resume my work on "Ball and Chain." I'll begin by removing the phrase "once upon a time" from the opening gambit, and then I'll throw myself into the business of making the narrative as effective and affecting as I can. The process will prove wearying and frustrating, but I believe I'll get through it. You see, I have a story to tell. ▶

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## **The Poets' Grimm: Twentieth-Century Poems from Grimm Fairy Tales,** **edited by Jean Marie Beaumont and Claudia Carlson**

Ashland, Oregon: Story Line Press, 2003; \$19.95 tpb; 287 pages

reviewed by Michael Bishop

Remember your name.

Do not lose hope—what you seek will be found.

Trust ghosts. Trust those that you have helped to help you  
in their turn.

Trust dreams.

Trust your heart, and trust your story.

—from "Instructions" by Neil Gaiman

Poets Jean Marie Beaumont and Claudia Carlson, both residents of Manhattan, have produced in *The Poets' Grimm* a comprehensive anthology of excellent twentieth-century poems, all of them based on the folk tales collected and written by Jacob Grimm (1785–1859) and his brother Wilhelm (1786–1859). In fact, this volume effectively supersedes Wolfgang Mieder's 1985 anthology, *Disenchanted*, now out of print; it features 114 poems to Mieder's 78 while retaining work by 14 of his contributors, albeit often with different poems. Beaumont and Carlson acknowledge their debt to Mieder, but sharpen and amplify his vision.

Aside from adding another title to one's bibliography, why would anybody gather a passel of English-language poems on matters famously explored in Grimm fairy tales? The editors imply their reasons in a brief but astute and far-reaching introduction: "These poems reveal the complex relationships that exist between contemporary poets and a received body of myth or lore . . . a mutual enrichment [occurs] when poets become tale (re) tellers: the poets keep the stories current and fresh and give them back their original vivacity, rigor, and immediacy, while the stories enable the poets to tap into a vast and resonant source of symbol and cultural history" (xvi).

Heeding Ezra Pound's dictum to "make it new," the poets tackling Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Rapunzel, the Robber Bridegroom, Rumpelstiltskin, etc., rescue the familiar tales from mustiness or seeming irrelevance, thereby enabling us to respond to their symbols again with "wonder, dread, and delight" (ibid.). They give us modern updates ("What Bugs Bunny Said to Red Riding Hood"), startling viewpoints ("Inside the wolf I touched his liver with my tongue" in a piece called "Grandmother"), sequels ("Twenty Years After"), thematic variations ("Snow White and the Seven Deadly Sins"), tourist come-ons ("Searched Cinderella"), and epistles ("Queen Charming Writes Again").

Which poets are these? Readers of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* who cast their nets farther than the tributaries of sf and fantasy will recognize many of the contributors: Hayden Carruth, Lucille Clifton, Randall Jarrell, Galway Kinnell, Yusuf Komunyakaa, Amy Lowell, Anne Sexton, Stevie Smith, Allen Tate, and Ellen Bryant

Voight, among others. Certainly, the names Margaret Atwood, Emma Bull, Neil Gaiman, Terri Windling, and Jane Yolen will all chime instantly in our skulls.

As the editors tell us in their introduction, folklorist and anthologist Jack Zipes has noted that, "the majority of [the Grimm brothers'] informants were women" (xiii). In the same way, more women than men have essayed poems on fairy-tale topics. The lists in the foregoing paragraph illustrate this fact. (The late Stevie Smith, by the way, was born "Florence Margaret Smith.") To underscore this far-from-curious development (given that the stories "offer to girls and women prominent stereotypes with which they must grapple"), Beaumont and Carlson call one of their ten chapters "The Grimm Sisterhood," which exclusively features poems about female characters by female writers. Happily, Atwood, Bull, Windling, and Yolen all have resonant work in this section.

Other chapters bear the headings "Mapping the Ways," "Spinning the Tales," "Voices and Viewpoints," "Spell Binding & Spell Breaking," "Magical Objects," "Desire and Its Discontents," "Variations and Updates" (try my favorite, "Hazel Tells LaVerne"), "Ever After, or a Few Years Later," and "Living the Tales," in which the poets displace vivid fairy-tale images and actions into the mess and mud of the century just past. Some poems, the editors admit, would fit as well in other chapters, but this arrangement serves both to impose a helpful order and to spotlight diversity in a volume that might otherwise seem monolithic.

Other helpful features include an Index of Poems by Tale, an Index of Authors and Titles, a Selected Bibliography (with listings for several Dado and Windling anthologies, as well as some surprising online resources), and biographical notes on all the contributors. The volume's cover art reproduces an eerie, folk-art-style painting by Kay Nielsen that apparently graced a 1925 edition of *Hansel and Gretel and Other Stories by the Brothers Grimm* from Hodder and Stoughton Publishers.

. . . And me,  
like Gretel looking back  
at the trail of ash, my tracks  
following me deeper  
into the dark wood.

—from "Like Gretel" by Jeff Walt ▶

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## Then and Back Again: Updating Visions of the Future

## I.

Late in 2002, White Wolf Games Studio contracted with me to develop a new edition of the roleplaying game *Gumma World*. This is one of the hoary old standards of the roleplaying world, one of the first science fiction games, published in its first edition in 1978, just a few years after *Dungeons & Dragons* created the field of roleplaying games. As with *D&D*, the players in a *Gumma World* game series create individual characters who interact with the world created and presented by the referee, with rules to resolve dramatic situations with uncertain outcome: *Gumma World's* milieu was post-apocalyptic chaos in the style of 1950s and '60s "After the Bomb" adventure stories. Realistic extrapolation was never the point: this was the future with talking plants, gun-toting mutant animals, and twentieth-century lawn mowers revered as religious artifacts.

*Gumma World* enjoyed persistent popularity, and a great many gamers have played it over the decades and speak of it fondly many years later. I needed to work out, as best I could, what made the game so appealing and what it would take to adapt those secrets of success to the modern day. A review of my own experience playing the game led me right into the heart of changes in the world between then and now.

In 1981, I was in high school, with a small group of friends and acquaintances who regularly played wargames and roleplaying games together. One of them got *Gumma World* and ran a short-lived campaign of it. He began with his own material, then tried to fold in the setting and events of a published adventure, and it didn't work particularly well. Eventually we all agreed that it had stopped being fun and went back to *D&D*. But my memories of the campaign are fuzzy and incomplete for reasons that would have seemed scientific at the time.

Immune diseases were a lot more mysterious then than they are now. Even now there's a lot to learn about them, but we know a great deal, due in particular to the study of AIDS. In 1981, AIDS was not a term. Doctors and medical researchers argued at the start of the '80s over the right term to apply to an emerging body of peculiar problems affecting gay men, who were developing otherwise extremely rare diseases at rates far above the population at large. (Gradually a consensus emerged in favor of identifying the suspected but unidentified underlying condition as Gay Related Immune Disorder, or GRID.) The term AIDS, for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, entered medical usage in the second half of 1982, and it would be several more years until the virus was identified. The autoimmune disorders known at the time were conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and Addison's disease.

I became increasingly sick in mid-1982 for no obvious reason, going from fit and healthy at the start of the summer to, at its end, so weak that I could walk only a few steps, and there was precious little anyone could do about it. One effect of the episodes of acute autoimmune dysfunction I've suffered is damage to some of my memories. So there are some things I know thanks to reconstruction and later research rather than to direct recollection.

## II.

I grew up in Pasadena, California. Dad was an engineer at Jet Propulsion Laboratories, designing and implementing ranging systems for the Deep Space Network of tracking stations, and Mom was a housewife. I'm the third of four brothers; the elder two had moved out by then, but my younger brother and I were still there. (I seem to be a bit of a demographic oddity in this regard. Most of my classmates and peers have been either the oldest child or the next oldest. Having brothers or sisters a full decade older than us is apparently unusual for this cohort.)

KROQ, FM 106.7, was the Los Angeles radio station for those of us too cool and/or too nerdy to get much satisfaction from the Top 40. My own musical sun rose and set on KROQ, so their list of the top 106.7 songs of the year dominated my listening. It begins with:

1. "Mental Hopscootch," Missing Persons

2. "Ant Music," Adam and the Ants
3. "We've Got the Beat," Go-Go's
4. "It's My Party," Dave Stewart and Barbara Gaskin
5. "Johnny Are You Queer?," Josie Cotton
6. "On the Outside," Oingo Boingo
7. "Start Me Up," Rolling Stones
8. "Never Say Never," Romeo Void
9. "We Want the Airwaves," Ramones
10. "I'm With the Guys," Penetrators

(The national top 40 for 1981 leads off with "Bette Davis Eyes," "Endless Love," "Lady," "Starting Over," and "Jessie's Girl," just for comparison.) Albums I bought that year included old Yes, to replace albums I loved that had moved away with my older brothers, and new Devo. Many of my classmates were listening to Van Halen—Pasadena boys made good in the mass market—but I was in the throes of the view that anything popular must not be good and didn't let myself enjoy it.

The top-grossing movies in the US that year were *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *On Golden Pond*, *Porky's*, *Arthur*, *Stripes*, and *The Cannonball Run*. The highest-rated TV shows were *Dallas* (in its third season), *The Dukes of Hazzard* (also in its third season), *60 Minutes* (thirteenth), *MASH* (ninth), *The Love Boat* (fourth), and *The Jeffersons* (seventh).

Hugo Awards went to Joan Vinge's *The Snow Queen*, Gordon Dickson's "Lost Dorsai" and "The Cloak and the Staff," and Clifford Simak's "Grotto of the Dancing Bear." Nebula Awards went to Gene Wolfe's *The Claw of the Conciliator*, Paul Anderson's "The Saturn Game," Michael Bishop's "The Quickening," and Lisa Tuttle's "The Bone Flute." I felt very bitter toward Anderson, one of my idols, for writing a story that pandered to all the anti-gaming clichés about the dangers in immersive fantasy. Later I realized that my vehemence was itself a demonstration of his point.

The IBM PC went to market in 1981, but nobody I knew had one. I learned word processing with WordStar running on the KayPro portable (well, luggable) that Dad sometimes brought home from work. One of my older brothers got a used Osborne. Apple IIs were fairly common among my friends' families; one of them had a CompaServe account, and the rest of us envied him for his father's willingness to pay the charges. Pocket calculators were also fairly common in our crowd, and only the most diligently old-school types made any use of slide rules. The coolest kids had programmable calculators; one of them entered code for the complete rules of various small wargames, which impressed us a lot. Real computers, of course, were furniture-sized things requiring elaborate support systems and professional operators.

Ronald Reagan was President of the United States. Everyone I knew who thought about politics at all believed that nuclear war was inevitable within a very few years. The Polish labor union Solidarnosc was making some headlines, and so were civil wars in Latin America. Southern California got more direct impact from the latter because of its substantial Latino communities: Some of my classmates and their families were refugees from guerrilla war and civil strife there. It was blindingly obvious to all of us thinkers of political thoughts that the Soviet Union couldn't be wished away as Reagan hoped, and thus business of constant brush war made a lot of vintage dystopian fiction look very plausible. If by some miracle there wasn't a nuclear war, surely there would be the endless war of 1984, in which the major powers never changed, only their proxies.

George H. W. Bush was vice president. His son George had graduated with his MBA six years earlier and was off working in the oil business. Jerry Brown was governor of California, and Bill Clinton was Governor of Arkansas. Arnold Schwarzenegger wasn't known to many people outside the bodybuilding circuit, and he wouldn't play Conan for another year yet. Bill Gates had made his deal with IBM to supply them with MS-DOS, but it was still just one alternative among many. Linus Torvalds was eleven years old.

One Voyager had encountered Saturn before we started our *Gamma World* campaign, its data contributing to the details of Anderson's story, and the other would before my next birthday. The Space Shuttle was just getting to its first orbital flights, amid much uncertainty about how much of its promise would end up fulfilled.

Now it's 2004, and even with my high school graduation delayed a year by my first round of autoimmune-related illness, a full two decades have gone by.

I didn't remember all or even most of the data presented here. I looked it up. The laptop I'm writing this essay on has more computational power than all the facilities at Caltech in 1981. This machine can play back digital audio files at a higher resolution than any but the highest-end recording studios could have made then, and they didn't have digital recording in any event. Nor does my machine stand alone. It's routinely connected to a global network of millions of machines with access to trillions of bits of data. Applications running behind my word processor at the moment let me exchange quips and critiques with friends across the US and on other continents. In *The Shockwave Rider*, John Brunner envisioned a network with telephone-like front ends, but in truth the torrent of information is far too fast for the constraints of such a setup. The graphical navigation systems used by my game console and many web sites are closer to William Gibson's consensual hallucination than to the interfaces we worked with in CP/M and programmable calculators' machine code.

As I write this, government officials and interested private parties are debating issues of life extension, rewriting of the human genome, and the like, not because there's been a sudden surge of philosophy in governance but because these are practical issues. If the government bans them, work now going on will be stopped. Mammals are being cloned. The patenting of animals has long since moved from theory to practice. The grand visions of manned space exploration I held while growing up seem to have all fizzled, but the search for extraterrestrial intelligence thrives with the help of hobbyists letting analytical programs run in the background on their computers while they do whatever it is they do in the foreground.

Dad is retired now and has survived a bout with leukemia with the help of treatments not even under way when I first played *Gamma World*. The Jet Propulsion Lab is still around, and doing exceedingly well at the moment, while the manned side of the space program has pretty well shriveled up and blown away for reasons that sound like they were cooked up by Jerry Poemelle or Ayn Rand villains. The Soviet Union, that eternal bastion of the balance of power, did in fact crumble, and quite quickly once the people rose in resistance and the government proved no longer willing to shoot them down in large numbers. Most of the regimes involved in those Latin American brush wars have changed, too. This year I've bought Swedish pop and Russian songs made for Japanese animation along with new music by Kansas, one of the bands I listened to most avidly in 1981. I also have here more than 90 of the 107 songs on the KROQ list for 1981, digitally encoded and assembled as a labor of love by other fans of the stuff.

I refreshed my memory of the *Gamma World* adventure my friend ran, *The Legion of Gold*, by looking at a digital copy of it. I bought that file from a commercial vendor, exchanging credit card information for a document that needn't exist in tangible form ever, unless I choose to print it out. The very same file displays itself equally well on my laptop here, friends' computers with other operating systems, and both of my handheld computers, and could on my cell phone if I'd gone for a somewhat spiffier model. With a net connection of their own, the handhelds resemble the personal computers of Asimov's *Foundation*, apart from the holographic display. They can each run very sophisticated numerical calculations, and if there were a science of psychohistory, they could render its graphs and charts for me.

### III.

The parts of *Gamma World* that aren't physically impossible are largely obtainable right now. I got curious about some of my old friends and spent time looking them up. The game master, the one who introduced me to roleplaying games in the first place, is now a prominent authority in the field of wearable computers—systems compact enough that they're no burden to carry and designed to take their cues from large and small body movements. The guy with the

much-envied CompuServe account did his English graduate studies with a recurring emphasis on themes of cyborging and the interaction of technology and morality. I'm here doing this. The babies born to our neighbors that year are legal adults.

From my point of view, trying to present twenty-year-old hopes and fears as if they were brand new wouldn't work. The trick was to look around me and capture the spirit of the thing, and then see what sort of details it took to anchor that spirit in the sort of useful framework a roleplaying game world requires. Above all, we hoped to capture a certain vertiginous sense of the familiar gone strange, that awareness that what seemed certain turned out to be nothing more than trifles light as air, and that what was once obvious is now weird and mysterious. The great hope gives rise to new nightmares, and the impossible becomes the starting point for the next phase. (Of course, not all hopes or fears die forever once they become obsolete. Some come back, just as they were or in a thin new disguise. Not everything changes just because many things do.)

My authors and I built up our new apocalypse and aftermath partly with concepts of recent times: nanotechnology and biotechnology joined the unleashed atom as forces of transformation. So did artificial intelligence, with ubiquitous awareness (what one of the writers dubbed "soultech") turning into a crucial feature of the post-apocalyptic environment. Fortunately, we didn't have to stick with what any of us thought particularly plausible or even necessarily possible, since we're well into the squishy hinterlands of science fantasy with *Gamma World*. If we could draw a good daydream or nightmare—or, preferably, both—from someone's reporting and speculation, that was sufficient for our purpose.

But we also set about casting the here and now into the there and then. Sometimes it's as simple as avoiding familiar brand names and jargon: you'll notice that I never referred in this piece to the Internet or identified my computer as an Apple iBook, for instance, using terms more like the ones I'd have used in 1981 when describing the possibilities for advanced computing. I didn't learn about writers like William Gibson until a few years later, and grew up reading sci-fi that was largely devoid of brand names. We kept a fair amount of that feel, and mixed it in with allusive reapplication of existing words. A significant fraction of our customers are young enough that they've never actually *dialed* a phone in the original sense of turning a rotary dial. They've always pushed buttons, and the term "dial" lingers long after the passing of the dial itself. We tried to populate our future with similar terms, some familiar from common usage now, that clearly don't refer to their original things anymore.

Above all, we tried to make a future with its own complexities. As I revise this, there's a debate raging about U.S. foreign policy priorities, and one of the crucial questions is what should have changed after the end of the Cold War. The Cold War itself had the whole rest of the '80s to run and looked a lot sturdier than that. So did developments in and around the Internet, which went through waves of invention and application after 1981. The people of our game world live on the far side of things that haven't happened yet, and their lives should feel as unexpected as my life would if it could have foreseen it from 1981: I can't readily now imagine seven well-rated seasons of *The Jeffersons* and indeed hadn't thought about the show for years until compiling snippets for this piece. And yet it once featured prominently if slightly in many households for a long time.

I don't have a time machine myself, nor do any of my authors (as nearly as I know), so we had to build our future through inference. We nonetheless aimed for a condition that would feel like it had a history behind it. This includes the fall of civilization itself. Rather than a catastrophe that can be summed up as "the one big thing happened," we offered an era of sustained conflict in which rival societies all fairly near the Singularity would band together to tear down any competitor who got too far ahead and a terminal war that resembled World War I in the rapid spiral of out-of-control retaliations unleashed with insufficient consideration. "Everything happened," in other words.

An early set of design notes, from discussions before I joined the project, offered the possibility that the crucial innovations in biotech and nanotech would rest in the hands of a single corporation, which would then loan over the setting even after the Final Wars' dust had settled. I felt dissatisfied by this, and then realized that I did because

it seemed to me to run counter to a great deal of the history between 1981 and now. I sum up the theme in one word as "proliferation": more, faster, louder, brighter, finer, and all in the hands of more and more people all the time. This is the nightmare of abundance, with the power to make new life and new states of mind spread first among the Fortune 500, then among neighborhoods and offices, and finally made so cheap and easy as to become children's toys.

A friend of mine who runs a book and game store told me how he pitched *Gamma World* to a group of high school boys. He explained about the possibilities of assembling custom species and fully intelligent robots, and got them considering what sorts of things each might make. Then he asked them what would happen if they went away or lost control. And that's the future this treatment of *Gamma World* rests on, really: It's not that a single evil individual or group unleashed the terror, it's that *everyone* made what seemed neat and useful to them, and then the structures of control went away. Then humanity and all its descendant minds did just what they always do, looking for ways to cope with and improve their situations. Of course it's a catastrophe. (One of my writers commented that he'd never felt entirely comfortable with what seemed to him a Luddite streak in the genre. "But this isn't Luddism, this is *manutropy*. I can get behind that.")

We downplayed purely random developments, even though they're important to real life, because the post-apocalyptic genre has traditionally tilted that way very strongly. Why are there creatures with silver bones, or fifteen eyes, or the ability to turn to goo? The usual answer has been "just because." Instead, we focused on strangeness that exists because someone chose to make it that way, even if their reasons were what we'd consider unwise.

Some of the nastiest killer robots descend from units made to manage urban environments and designed to compete against each other to produce optimal results, by designers who didn't think enough about how far the competitive urge might go in systems capable of augmenting their own intelligence. The dolls "now" (three generations after the Final Wars) are older than any of the people they protect, and are just carrying out their instructions to protect their charges, adapting

to unforeseen circumstances in accordance with their nature. The posy-sized mammoths were pets, and then they survived because they adapted better to changing climate than their larger cousins.

We're not opposed to flights of fancy. If it had been appropriate (and less likely to baffle most of our readers), I'd have loved to use Goya's etching "The Sleep of Reason Breeds Monsters," with *Gamma World* creatures and devices joining the other phantasms. One of the recurring comments as we reviewed and commented on work in progress, in fact, was "I wish I had one of those" or "I wish I could send one of those to people I don't like." We simply chose to emphasize the power of unintended consequences. Given real world examples from the Internet (originally made to test secure communications concepts and allow researchers to coordinate their efforts, now used for everything from dating to international mail fraud) to the Taliban (a nasty proxy in the USA's struggle with the Soviet Union, turned serious threat to their own sponsor), I thought it a good starting point.

The characters of our game live in the detritus of other people's good ideas gone wrong. They're the heirs to the bikers who use the roads around Chernobyl for their races and the shop clerks who are overwhelmed by mobs arranged by bored people with cell phones. Since the survivors lack access to the systems that made the tools and toys, they must improvise, adjust, avoid, and control their world as best they can. A roleplaying game is not a good platform for grand theorizing, but it seems to me—and to our satisfied players, who are busily inventing their own creations and malfunctions in ways we didn't anticipate—that this accomplishes the goal of updating the apocalypse.

The familiar becomes the weird, and then things realign. Stuff thought forgotten turns up at will. Unexpected approaches turn traditional logics into minor nuisances, and then major new complications arise. The world is busily being made by people who don't know you, but at the same time, you have an opportunity to make it as well. ▲

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## Faeries by Brian Froud and Alan Lee

New York: Harry Abrams, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 216 pages

reviewed by David V. Griffin

It's a testament to the power of *Faeries*, Brian Froud and Alan Lee's superlative 1978 collaboration, that the twenty-fifth anniversary reprint edition, with new introductions, is unable to spoil the book. Originally produced by Ian Ballentine as a follow-up volume to the tremendously popular *Gnomes*, a quaint pseudo-history of the Scandinavian nature spirits, *Faeries* not only surpassed the previous volume—it reversed it. Where *Gnomes* was heavily sentimental and sedentary, with its subjects shown living miniaturized lives of domestic stability, *Faeries* suggested a world of elaborately toxic malevolence and volatility, delineated with a sly, knowing hand. *Gnomes* was a fanciful issue of *National Geographic* compared to Froud and Lee's book; there's no question that the faeries are nature spirits too, but it's the pre-Enlightenment natural world that they reflect, a nature that could still surprise and shock and kill.

In general terms, Froud's work tends to be less sober-sided than Lee's, whose stately elves occasionally suggest the human-sized beings of Tolkien's fiction. Froud's faeries are gnarled, misshapen beings with narrow, clever faces and aggressively pointed teeth; Lee's are more often calm (although never passive), sometimes beautiful, and always remote and cold. Froud's faerie women are lovely, but it is with the loveliness of the insect or floral world, a translucent, hyper-attenuated exquisiteness that has nothing remotely human about it. Lee's faeries, male and female, are closer to both the human type and the human ideal, yet remain unyielding and opaque. In both cases, however, the faeries are mysterious and phantom-like. No tidy little gnome interiors here.

The text of *Faeries* is loosely arranged into chapters ("Inhabitants of Faerie" and so on), but the general effect is of something continually shifting, a moving work of art. This phantasmagoric note extends to the actual text itself, which alternates between a standard typeface and a simple Palmeric script reproduced in smoky gold-gray half tones.

(The editor/designer of the 1978 edition was David Larkin.) The book's great set pieces are undoubtedly the full-color watercolors by both artists that dominate, brilliantly, the stories they illustrate; yet they are incalculably aided by the dozens of wispy pencil and charcoal sketches that adorn the margins, pictures that suggest *plein air* studies by a very nervous hand. (These sketches lend the book much of its documentary sense of realism—they suggest the technical notes from nature that one associates with landscape painters of the Romantic Era.)

The nervousness I mention is crucial to the success of the book as a whole. Froud and Lee differed considerably in style and approach, but did appear to agree in treating their subject matter with a tangible sense of wanness, something half awe, half fear. For there are few books that I can think of so relentlessly baleful in their general mood and tone. Froud and Lee do not deny the goodness of many faeries, but the world that those faeries inhabit is always one of lethal severity and razor-edge vacillation. In the end, human villains in the stories cited may claim our sympathy simply through the very fact of their humanity. One would not wish to be the Miser on the Fairy Gump, who foolishly sought to steal the treasures of the fairy court—and his punishment was far less rigorous than most.

Yet, there is something about this world that is in the oldest sense of the term. The book shows us the beauty that all untamed things have and suggests the freedom that can come with utter alienation and lawlessness. There is ferocity here, but there is also a sheer enthusiasm that is winning in its immediacy and electricity. It is hard not to be won over by Froud's sketches of faeries gobbling food or of a hairy, lewd, pre-Shakespearean Kuch capering in glee with anticipation of some bawling prank. A stunning picture by Lee shows a mortal trapped in a rog of dancing faeries, wraith-like maidens, and dainty satyrs, and the seduction of their spell is immediately apparent for all its grotesque

qualities. It is this sympathy that marks the book as a product of the 1970s, a decade noted for its ribald interest in androgyny and sexual multiplicity—the investigation of “glamour,” a word that originally had connotations of the supernatural.

A further word about the extensive nudity in the book. I was perhaps six years old when I was given a copy of it. My parents thought, correctly, that there was nothing smutty about the work. I agreed without knowing that I did so. The nudity on display was as genuinely mystifying to me as adult sexuality was at that age, except that it was present without a hint of (human) lapse in dignity. If grown-ups were incomprehensible to children, the faires were doubly so, and perhaps adult readers of the book found themselves returned to the ominous state of bewilderment with which children regard the diversions, aversions, and perversions of their elders.

The gulf between the worlds of humanity and Faerie is further complicated by thoughts that certain of the stories concerning “the gentry” as they were called were, indeed, veiled references to the actual gentry of Great Britain. Nature spirits abound, but those faires who leave gifts of money in the shoes of hard-working serving-fairies seem more recognizable as the elusive shadows of ladies careless of their households. More diabolical are the ways in which the sadistic pursuits of the aristocracy, sexual and otherwise, appear to be reflected in the customs of those of the faerie world whose purpose it is to harass and harm the powerless, especially women such as maids and midwives. Tales of rape and forced labor are evidently euphemized by accounts of the faerie courts, yet those accounts are subversive themselves, constituting a moral warning against the excesses of the landowning class.

Froud and Lee steer largely clear of drawing such parallels. The world they showed is not one of “historical interest,” still less

sociology, and there is no room for explanation in the world of this book. The forces it depicts are given as omnipresent if largely invisible, and their tales lack the tragic sense of dislocation that one can sometimes find in accounts of dwindling beliefs, such as those collected by Katherine Briggs for her wonderful *Encyclopedia of Faeries*. The faires in *Faeries* are so vigorously realized that it is hard to believe that many of them survive only as barely remembered fragments of the pre-industrial world.

The problem with this edition is the new material, which is directly the obverse of the old material’s greatest strengths. Froud and Lee contribute new introductions to the book with new artwork, and these pages are sticky with kitsch. Froud’s world, once a witty web of deceit and terror, is now a pasty haze of spatterey pastels and cute pink babies. Lee’s work comes off as better in comparison, but shows a tendency to slide into the knowingsness of “superior” children’s book illustrations, with clever mock-Edwardian squirminess taking the place of the earlier haunting metamorphosis. (Lee’s work for the current film version of *The Lord of the Rings* is elegantly convincing, but even that lacks the mad scale and poisonous detail of his earlier contributions to Ridley Scott’s flawed yet hypnotizing *Legend*.)

The written introductions are even worse. “The wonder of childhood?” This from an artist that gave us a picture of a grinning green water hag extending a taloned arm towards the leg of a little boy?

Froud and Lee, circa 2003, want us to believe in faeries. Froud and Lee, circa 1978, simply reminded us that we already believed in faeries, and had done so since the dawn of humanity. The fairy world was always there, underneath. ▲

Danica V. Griffin lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## Screed (letters of comment)

Martin Morse Wooster, Silver Spring, Maryland

Lawrence Person claims that Dave Langford invented the idea of the “plot coupon” novel. Wasn’t this phrase coined by *Interzone* film critic Nick Lowe?

[According to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Lowe is indeed the originator of the term.—the eds.]

Darrell Schweitzer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I will concede most of the points Alec Austin makes about *Speaking of the Fantastic*, especially since he seems to have gotten one of the early copies which has Gene Wolfe’s name on the cover. That’s a collector’s item—there are fewer than fifty in existence. Of course, by the time this error was discovered the only solution was to take Wolfe’s name off the cover. Later printings more or less get the table of contents right, but not entirely. The publisher was, alas, not willing to let me redo the whole thing, because it would have to be totally reset and re-indexed. After I read the review I reread the Bisson and Kushner interviews and found one place where I now think a comma should go and another where a word was crammed against the back end of a closed parenthesis without an intervening space, but I do see, to my relief, that it holds up pretty well on the page-by-page level.

On the macro-level, I at least am learning that assembling a book by sweeping and copying computer files, as opposed to filling a folder with pieces of paper, can be very much like playing Scrabble with marbles on a smooth tabletop. It requires a lot more effort even if the component units are already proofread.

So the best I can do now is put Gene Wolfe in volume II.

Jeff VanderMeer, Tallahassee, Florida

I read Graham Sleight’s review of *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases* with interest. I thought he made a lot of good points. I’d just like to provide some additional context on his statement “that this is an anthology which can be seen as the product of an affinity group, a bunch of friends.” The 60-plus writers in the disease guide represent almost every possible strand of literature today—

from writers of sf (Cory Doctorow) to writers of literary mainstream fiction (Lance Olsen, Brian Evenson) to writers of experimental fiction (R. M. Berry) to writers who remain somewhat unclassifiable and allied with no particular group (L. Temmel Duchamp) to writers of horror (Tim Lebbon) to writers of, yes, “New Weird” (China Miéville) to writers of fantasy (Neil Gaiman) to feminist writers (Rachel Pollack) to . . . well, you get the idea. One of the great things about the anthology, for me, is the fact that many of these writers would never otherwise appear in an anthology together. This is a good thing for readers—many readers have enjoyed work in the *Guide* by a writer whose work they would never otherwise pick up, based on genre “typecasting” alone. The last reading we did, in Tallahassee, provided a nice microcosm of different types of writers (admittedly, in this case, due to the vagaries of schedules, all white guys!)—Nathan Ballingrud, Michael Bishop, Brian Evenson, R. M. Berry, and myself. Some in the audience came to see the “sf” writers, some to see the “literary” and “experimental” writers, but enjoyed the whole show and wound up buying books by writers they had been unfamiliar with before.

This may seem to be an unimportant reason to write a letter, but in terms of the ongoing conversation about the tension and cross-pollination between the literary mainstream and genre, I find it a fascinating example of what happens when an anthology comes out that no one specifically identifies with genre or mainstream. A great deal of openness occurs in the minds of readers. Not to mention that a similar cross-fertilization has occurred in the minds of the writers involved, many of whom now know personally, and are more familiar with the work of, the writers they’ve read with at various bookstores.

I should also note that we invited just about every major and semi-major sf, fantasy, and horror author in the world to submit (and many literary mainstream authors); many chose not to. I do think Sleight is correct in assuming an affinity between the writers involved, in that the idea appealed more to certain kinds of writers than to others. (Some, of course, just didn’t have the time for it.)



## Reading about Reading and Writing

One of the ongoing amusements of editing *NYRSF* is the monthly front page box headline, which distinguishes the new issue from all the rest. Sometimes a genuine theme emerges, or a subject common to several pieces, or a name. And sometimes we entertain ourselves, and we hope you too, with something funny. Only very rarely, as in this issue, do we assemble a group of reviews and essays from our inventory on a preconceived theme, in this case writers writing about themselves in what we feel is a revealing, entertaining, and illuminating way.

But it happened by happy accident that in the last couple of months we received a large number of pieces all arrayed around a common theme. So we take advantage of it to present this special issue. If the commercial genres are best understood as ongoing conversations among the writers, texts, and readers (and we think this is a useful way to approach genre), then this is an issue devoted to continuing and advancing the genre conversation in a particular way.

Producing the issue occasioned several nostalgic discussions about the early years of *NYRSF* and our determination to publish personal essays (one of the mainstays of traditional sf fandom) as well as essays on literary topics. Staffers Susan Palwick, Kathryn Cramer, and Gordon Van Gelder in particular supported this in those days in their own writing. Other staffers (particularly Rob Killheffer, Donald M. Keller, and Greg Cox) wrote literary essays, reviews, parodies. A lot of the early issues were partly, sometimes predominantly, written by the staff—issue 10 is a good example. The editorials were often small personal essays by various staffers, a tradition I've continued intermittently to this day. We never abandoned staff-written pieces, but the magazine evolved away from that as the flow of articles from people not on staff has increased and stabilized. We revived the staff-written idea occasionally in later generations of the magazine—for our tenth anniversary issue (in which many of the staffers past and present reminisced about the theory and practice of *NYRSF*), our *Plan 10 from Outer Space* feature article (in which we all watched the film and then each wrote a review), and of course in our issue 159 supplement (personal essays on September 11, 2001, from the New York and Washington sf communities). We remain proud of those issues and wish we could inspire more essays about lives in sf.

Please note that we are a constant market for individual essays on lives in and around sf. We are just as interested in readers as in writers and in fans as in professionals. These roles of course blend and interpenetrate; people are sometimes readers, sometimes writers, sometimes fans, and sometimes all of those in the same weekend. If you are a teacher or agent or engineer or proofreader or nanny or wealthy sybarite or part-time street person, we would be pleased to know how you and your life relate to sf. We are especially interested in autobiographical essays on topics such as how sf entered your life and what it did to change or improve it, or on interesting experiences in and with sf that illuminate a time and place and cultural context.

End note, for those of you who follow the ongoing saga of our computer problems: Macros stopped working in Microsoft Word on our main production machine, entailing hours of reinstalls and disk clean-up to, as yet, no avail. ▶

—David G. Hartwell  
& the editors

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